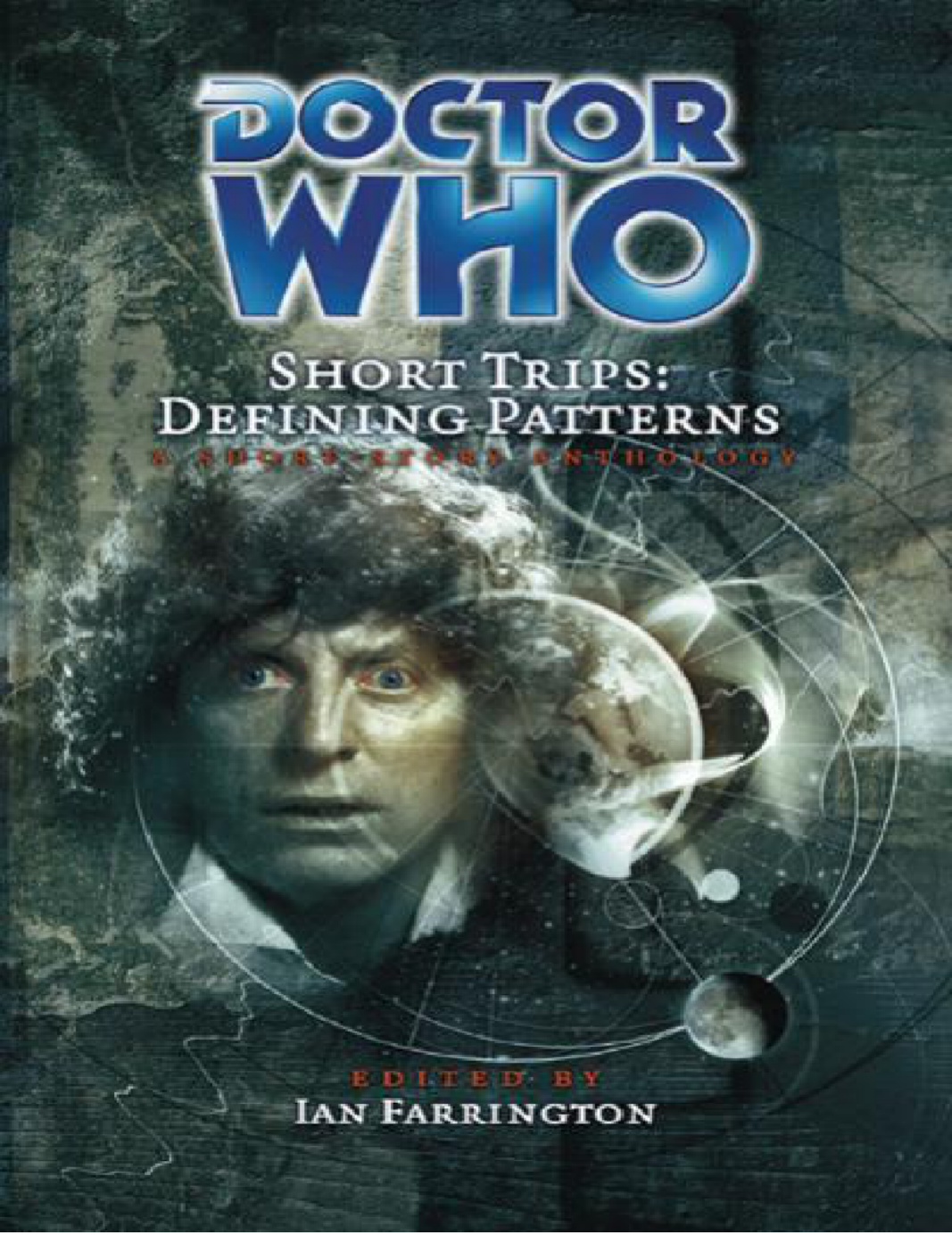
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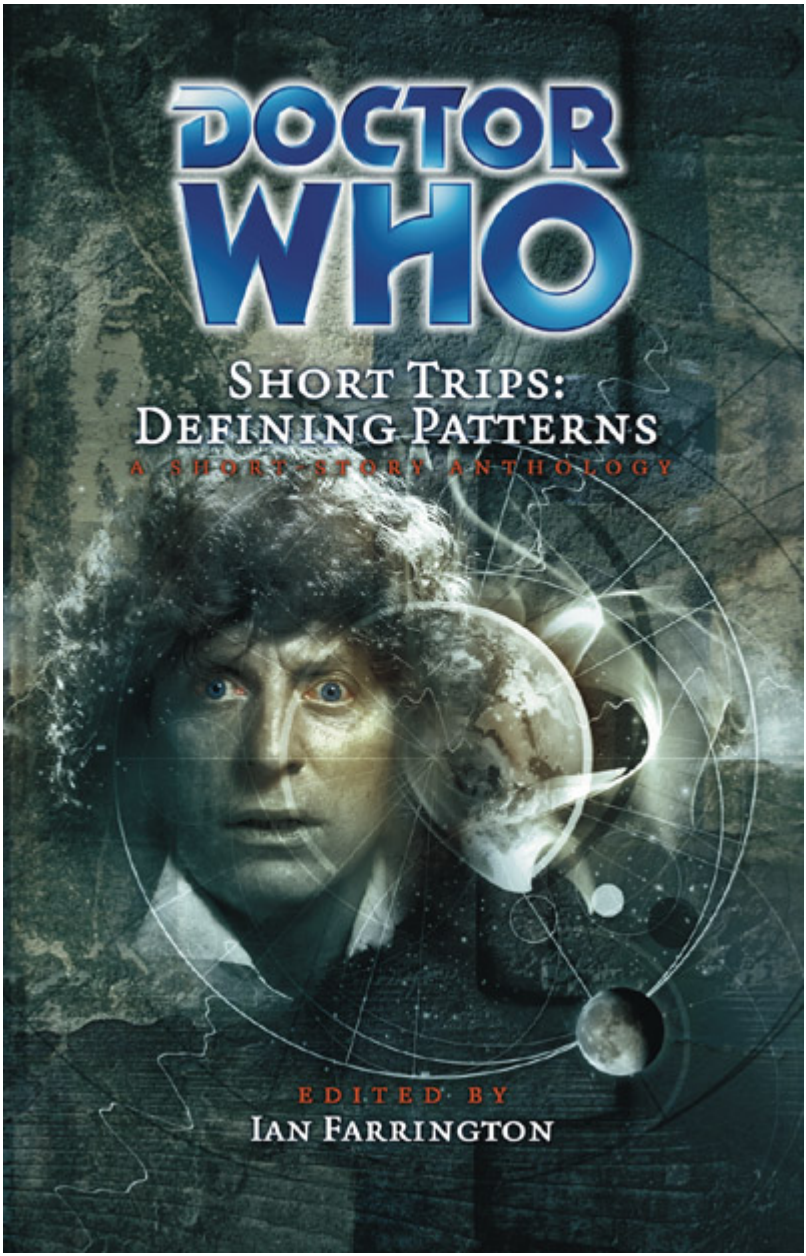
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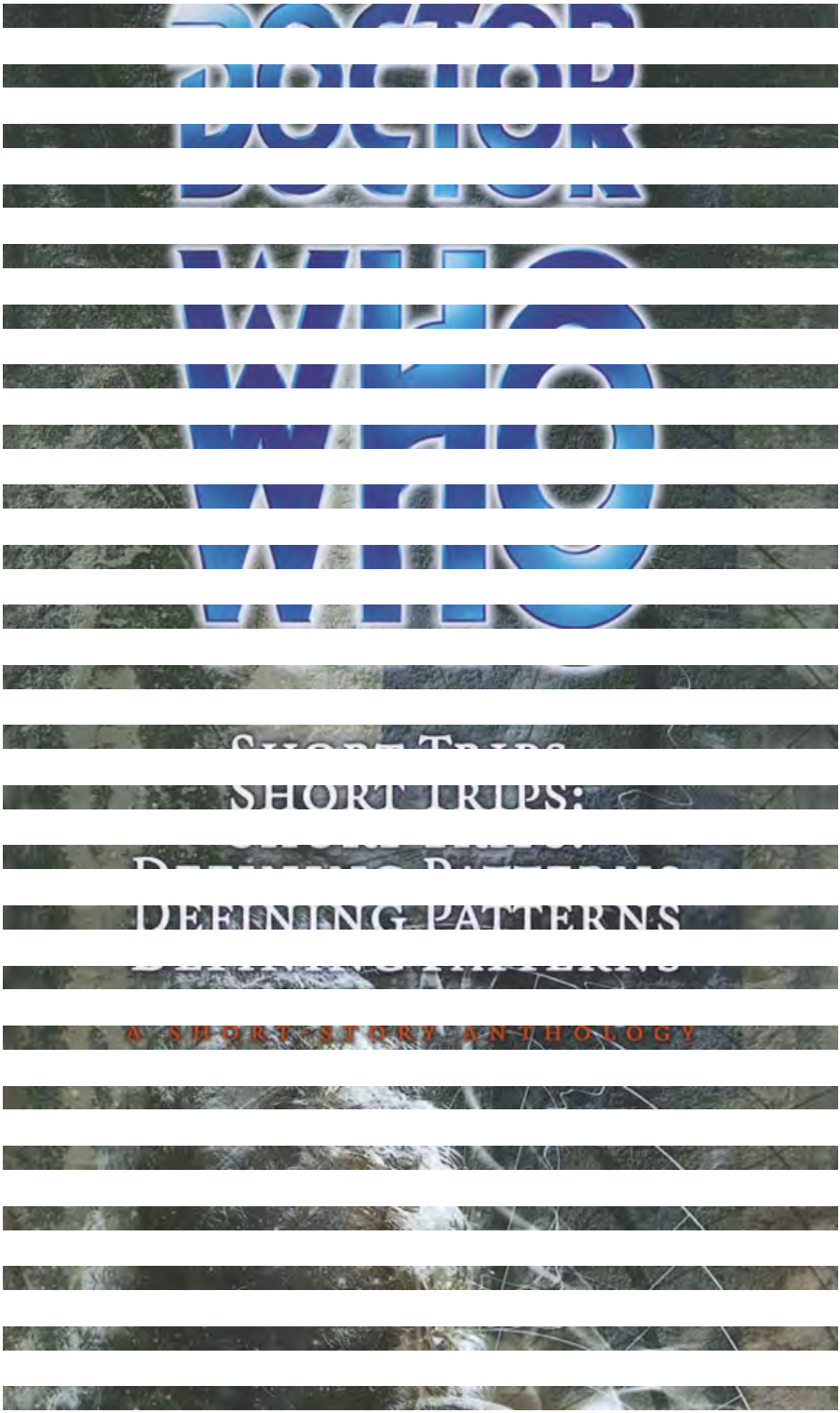
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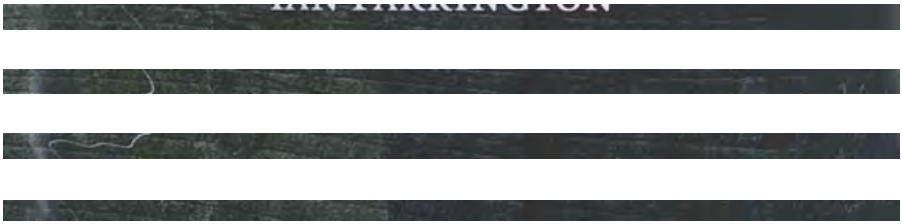

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Machine Time

George Ivanoff

An adventure of the Fourth Doctor

‘Now what do you suppose the odds are, hmm?’ the Doctor asked as he ran his fingers through his dark curly hair. ‘Something astronomical, no doubt. I could work it out for you, if you like.’

He held up one hand in front of his face, fingers spread wide. He started to silently mouth numbers. Then he held up his other hand and

continued. Suddenly he looked forward, a broad grin on his face.

‘I seem to have run out of fingers.’ He plunged his hands into the voluminous pockets of his jacket. ‘Same dimensional distress signal you used the other times, so you must have known that I’d respond if I picked it up. But the odds of actually picking it up.’ He shook his head.

‘Well... never mind. I’m here now, so let’s see what we can do.’

He took a step forward. There was a crackle of discharged energy

and the Doctor jumped back. He rubbed the back of his hand across his lip. ‘Well now... that didn’t happen last time.’

He dug through his pockets and pulled out an apple. He took a big bite, and then tossed an underarm. Electric-blue energy crackled as the apple was momentarily suspended in an aura of white-hot light. Then all was silent as the charred husk fell to the floor. The Doctor stared at it for a few moments, eyes wide.

‘And I was hoping to finish that later.’ He looked up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, then from right to left. ‘Hardly sophisticated,’

he mumbled, as he dug through his pockets. ‘Should have just the

thing. Ahh...’

He pulled out a small gold-tipped battery, rubbed the end of it

against his coat and then tossed it across the room. Energy crackled and arced in blue flashes as the Doctor whistled to himself. When the energy finally dissipated, the battery fell to the floor.

The Doctor stepped forward and picked it up with the end of scarf.

‘Been meaning to recharge that for... oh... decades.’

He blew on the battery, and then gingerly dropped it back into one of
1

his pockets.

Now able to enter the room, the Doctor walked to the far end. It was like entering into the innards of some giant, improbable machine.

Unlikely juxtapositions that defied logic: wires and pistons; cogs and

microchips; grinding gears and flickering diodes; computerised relays and spring-loaded mechanisms. Steam worked alongside uranium

power and anti-matter fusion. And there in the heart of it all was a tall metal box, looking like a cross between a sarcophagus and a cryogenic chamber.

The Doctor approached cautiously, lifted a hand and knocked on the glass plate. The occupant's eyes snapped open.

'Hello there,' grinned the Doctor. 'I'll have you out in a jiffy.'

The man inside nodded weakly. Within seconds the Doctor was

working on the locks, sonic screwdriver in hand. And within minutes the locks had given way and the lid was sliding back.

'Oh my,' the Doctor exclaimed as the occupant was fully revealed.

'Not a pretty sight, is it, Doctor?' breathed the man. 'I don't suppose you could...'

'Well...' said the Doctor, rubbing a hand across his face, then

tapping one finger thoughtfully against his nose. 'This could be

difficult.'

'I have the utmost confidence in you.'

The Doctor examined the man more closely. His clothes were in

tatters, barely coveting him in places; completely torn away in other places. Wires led from the top of the casket to three microchips that were embedded in the man's bald head. The flesh around them was

swollen and caked in dried blood. A sinewy, snake-like, metallic

tendril extended from the side of the casket to his right ear. His right arm was robotic, the intricate conglomeration of wires and mechanisms fused just below the shoulder to exposed muscle, tendon and bone. His left arm had small round metallic plates, no bigger than gold florins, grafted onto the skin, giving the appearance of armour. Each plate had a tiny crystal in its centre, which sparked from within. His left leg had been skewered in several places by thin metal rods that crossed and joined other rods, forming a cage that encircled the leg. Attached to the criss-crossing metal was a box with a digital

display of alien characters in glowing orange. His right leg was encased in a metallic sheath, wired into the side of the casket.

Directly in front of the man's chest, attached to rods protruding from the floor of the casket, was a complex apparatus with dozens of

miniature mechanical arms. One of these arms, ending in a scalpel blade, was extended towards the man. His shirt had been sliced open, and the tip of the scalpel was just touching his chest, a tiny drop of 2

blood forming.

'This time I came prepared,' said the Doctor, producing a small

leather folder. He opened it with a flick of his wrist to display the tools within, looking very much like the instruments of a picklock. 'I'll do what I can.'

Putting the tool set to one side, the Doctor began by using his sonic screwdriver to remove the central apparatus from its supporting rods.

As he placed it carefully onto the floor, the man heaved a sigh of relief.

Instantly, the apparatus sprung into life, its little arms flailing wildly about, scalpel desperately aiming for the Doctor's foot.

'Interesting,' exclaimed the Doctor as he held out his sonic

screwdriver. Moments later, the apparatus was belching smoke, its mechanical arms twitching helplessly.

The Doctor nodded and returned his attention to the man. 'Let's start at the top.'

He leaned into the casket to examine the microchips and wires in the man's head. Without looking, he snaked out a hand to the tools and retrieved one. He placed the tip of the plastic, pencil-like tool to the first of the microchips. There was a spark and the man winced. The Doctor repeated the procedure for the other two microchips.

'I've fused the neural connectors,' said the Doctor as he retrieved a small pair of clippers from the tool kit. He then snipped the wires. 'But I'm afraid I can't actually remove the chips.'

'I can live with that,' said the man with a lopsided grin.

‘Ahh.’ The Doctor examined the metallic tendril at the man’s ear.

‘This hasn’t reached your eardrum yet.’ He grabbed a laser-cutter from the tool kit, sliced through the tendril and pulled it out of the ear. Then he turned his attention to the man’s robotic arm. ‘I’m afraid there’s not much I can do about that – except maybe disable it.’

‘No need,’ assured the man. ‘I can control it.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Well, then, let’s have a look at this.’

He used a jeweller’s eyepiece to examine the metal plates in the

man’s left arm. ‘Fascinating,’ he said, as he lifted another tool and touched the crystal in the centre of one of the plates. It sparked and the Doctor pulled his fingers away. ‘Ouch,’ he exclaimed, and then his face broke into a grin. ‘Won’t do that again.’

Once more, he produced his trusty sonic screwdriver, and adjusted the settings. He then held it a couple of millimetres above the crystal and gave it a short burst. The crystal shattered into microscopic pieces.

‘Resonance crystals,’ explained the Doctor. ‘With this many of them on your arm, you could direct bolts of sonic energy strong enough to...’

He shook his head, unruly curls flopping from side to side. ‘Well...

strong enough!’

3

The Doctor positioned his sonic screwdriver over another metal plate and its crystal. ‘Of course, hit it with the right frequency and...’

The crystal shattered.

‘This could take a while,’ said the Doctor and he repositioned his screwdriver. ‘Perhaps we could pass the time with a few explanations.’

‘I was wondering how long it would be before you asked.’

‘I’ve asked you every time we’ve done this,’ said the Doctor as a second crystal shattered. ‘And each time you have managed to hurry me off without explaining anything.’ Another crystal shattered. ‘But things are getting serious now.’ A crystal shattered. ‘These implants and intrusions are getting worse.’

Shatter.

‘It’s progressive.’ The man smiled. ‘They get stronger as I get

weaker.’

Shatter.

‘I gathered that much.’ Shatter. ‘But why is this happening? Can it be stopped? Is there anything I can do? And who exactly are you,

anyway?’

Shatter.

‘Curious fellow, aren’t you?’

Shatter.

You might say that.’

Shatter.

Silence.

Shatter.

Silence.

Shatter.

Silence.

Shatter.

‘So, are you going to answer any of my questions?’

Shatter.

‘Why is this happening? Well… because the machines are trying to take over. Can it be stopped? I certainly hope so. Is there anything you can do? You’re already doing it. Who am I? That’s a little more

difficult.’

Shatter.

‘Well, that makes things perfectly clear, doesn’t it?’

Shatter.

‘Sarcasm does not suit you, Doctor.’

Shatter.

‘That’s the last one,’ said the Doctor. He swapped the sonic

screwdriver for the laser-cutter. ‘Now, as for this leg, I’ll be able to cut away most of the rods and remove the device... but the sections of rod 4

embedded in your leg...’

‘That is acceptable,’ interrupted the man. ‘I can manage with what remains.’

‘Yes,’ murmured the Doctor, as he began cutting, ‘I thought you’d say that.’

‘You are a Time Lord?’ said the man, more as a statement of fact

than a question.

The Doctor nodded without looking up from his work.

‘Sworn never to interfere in the events of the universe? Existing merely to observe?’

‘Well...’ mumbled the Doctor. ‘That’s the theory.’

‘I am in a similar circumstance.’ The man stared off into the

distance, gazing on his past. ‘My people exist outside of time... outside of the universe and its goings-on. We are not sworn to non-intervention. It is simply how we are... as you say, in theory.’

‘Theory is ever so neat and uncomplicated, isn’t it?’ grinned the Doctor. ‘Unlike reality.’

‘In order to exist in this universe – to intervene, to see to it that certain things happen in certain ways – I have had to take on physical form.’

‘You make it sound like you’re fated.’

‘Maybe by some people’s definitions, I am.’

‘Those who know the truth?’

‘No, Doctor – simply those who happen to define things in a certain way. However, this physical form... the bone, blood, flesh... comes with many disadvantages. Fortunately, enough of my true self remains for me to be able to hold back the machine time.’

‘Machine time?’ The Doctor looked up quizzically.

‘As opposed to the current flesh time.’

‘Machine time. Flesh time.’ The Doctor looked up after cutting off the last rod. ‘Sounds like someone is trying to shift the balance of ...’

‘The universe,’ finished the man. ‘I couldn’t just watch and allow it to happen.’ He looked around at his surroundings. ‘So here I am,

fighting for the universe... in my own way.’

‘Looks to me like you’re fighting for your life,’ observed the Doctor as he examined the man’s right leg.

‘That too.’ The man smiled sadly. ‘An unfortunate side effect of

existence in this universe is that... I can die.’

‘This thin film of metal looks like it has adhered to your skin,’

mumbled the Doctor, picking at it with a pair of tweezers. ‘But I have absolutely no idea what its function is.’ He looked up at the man. ‘I suppose I could just snip the wires. That will probably stop whatever it’s doing.’

5

‘What it is doing is coalescing the metallic elements of my blood,’

replied the man.

‘Really?’ The Doctor’s eyes widened with surprise. ‘Well, that could cause you some problems.’

‘Indeed!’ The Doctor cut the wires that connected the metal skin to the casket.

‘Thank you,’ said the man, stepping out of the casket and stretching.

‘That feels much better.’

‘Right,’ said the Doctor, picking up his tools and brandishing his sonic screwdriver. ‘Let’s see what we can do about the rest of this…

machinery.’ For a few seconds, it seemed as if the room were about to close in on the Doctor and the man – as if the very metal of the

machinery and even the walls pulsed in protest.

‘There is nothing that you can do,’ assured the man, ‘except,

perhaps, antagonise.’

‘You speak about this machinery as if it were alive,’ said the Doctor.

‘It is,’ answered the man matter-of-factly.

‘But…’

‘It is very much alive,’ assured the man. ‘There is no controlling organic sentience. No super-computer. It is metal and machinery given life… and, yes, thought, of a kind. Perhaps instinct is a better word. The instinct to survive, to grow, to add to itself… to utilise what it recognises as kindred… to subsume what is alien.’

‘Surely there must be something we can –’

‘I hope so, Doctor. I sincerely hope so.’ He suddenly looked very tired and worn, almost like a machine that was wearing out. ‘On your first visit, it was merely one moderately sized space vessel. Now… it is the size of a small planet. Were it not held in check, it could easily have been the size of an average solar system. And it would continue growing… exponentially… until… until… there was nothing but…

machine time.’

For the first time in his long life, the Doctor found himself

speechless. The scale of what he had just been told was staggering. The man continued.

‘For the moment, all I can do is hold back its progress… slow it down. But I am watching, thinking… hoping.’ He sighed. ‘But now it is time for you to leave.’

‘But…’

‘Your presence is a distraction. And I need to concentrate.’

‘I’m sure that if we put our minds together, we could...’

‘Leave now!’ the man shouted, as his robotic arm shot out, the metal fingers gripping the Doctor around the throat– constricting. ‘Leave now!’ As the man concentrated, slowly the metal fingers loosened their 6

grip. ‘Please, go.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, extricating himself from the metallic grip and rubbing at his throat, ‘since you put it that way.’

The man followed as the Doctor walked down the corridor to his

TARDIS, the very walls seeming to lean and bend towards him as he walked. The Doctor stopped suddenly, mouth agape, as he spotted the TARDIS. All sorts of machinery was crowded around it, as if awaiting the order to attack.

‘This must have happened before you freed me,’ explained the man.

‘I was concentrating so hard on keeping the machinery from

consuming me, that I had little effort left for your transport.’ He paused. ‘I apologise.’

The Doctor squeezed past a twisted mass of copper wire and

platinum filigree buzzing with barely restrained energy like a swarm of angry bees, to the TARDIS door. Sinewy metallic tendrils had snaked their way into the keyhole. The Doctor grabbed them and wrenched

them away. Then his key was in the lock, the door opened and the

Doctor was stepping inside. He paused on the threshold and turned back to the strange man who held the future of flesh time in the palm of his robotic hand.

‘We really must stop meeting like this,’ quipped the Doctor.

‘We will,’ assured the man. ‘I have a feeling the next time will be the last.’

‘You can’t know that for sure.’

‘Yes, I can, Doctor. The universe has many mysteries – countless

mysteries. Every action, every decision, every meeting, every word spoken... they all have unknown consequences. One individual could never comprehend his place in the universe. Even you. But take a step back, and the patterns are there for all to see...’

‘But that’s half the fun, I suppose,’ said the Doctor. ‘Living life, and not defining it all the time.’

‘Yes. I suppose it is. Now, leave, while you can.’

The Doctor took a deep breath. ‘I’d better go and prepare.’

And then he was gone – door closed and blue police box

disappearing.

‘You do that,’ whispered the man, staring at where the TARDIS had been. ‘You go and prepare. I’m counting on it.’

7

Are you prepared, Doctor?’ asked Emily Chaudhry.

The Doctor spun round from the console. ‘Prepared? Prepared for what, exactly?’

‘Whatever it is you’ve got us into now!’

Emily leaned against the wall, and felt round holes dig into her back. Will was already on the floor, cross-legged and looking bemused. And he had good reason to, she thought it was still, technically, his first day on the job. She’d only met him this morning – how long ago that seemed!

Will Hoffman, UNIT’s latest recruit. Young Northerner. A bit sarky. Nice-looking. But, as Emily had seen today, he could come through in a crisis – and could cope with what was thrown at him. And, in UNIT, that was essential.

Everyone who joined UNIT had to very quickly come to terms with aliens and time travel and all sorts of goings-on that the general public had no idea about.

For Will, however, ‘very quickly’ would be understating it. On his first day, he’d helped Emily battle monsters in south-east London and they’d met up with the Doctor. Emily and the Doctor went way back, she was one of the

few colonels who knew the truth about him. But for Will, it was a lot to take in at once. And it hadn't ended there – the Doctor had taken them on a short hop in the TARDIS. A short hop that ended up with the three of them in the middle of the Blitz.

'I am always prepared, Emily!' said the Doctor, not looking up from the console. His blond, curry hair shook as his head flitted from side to side, keeping an eye on various controls.

Emily didn't know this particular Doctor especially well. He'd looked very different when they'd first worked together, back in the nineties. He'd been a lot calmer too, and his dress sense slightly better. It would take some getting used to, all these clashing colours.

'Doctor?' Will joined him at the console.

'What is it, lieutenant?'

'Well, I hate to sound predictable, but are we nearly there yet?'

'Nearly. It's not just a case of tapping "September 1957" into a keypad and then putting your feet up, you how!'

They were going to 1957 because, after returning from wartime London, the Doctor had discovered a gap in the UNIT archives. A whole raft of information had gone missing in September 1957. When he'd suggested going back to investigate, Emily had reluctantly agreed, but inwardly sighed.

It had been a very long day already, and now they were heading back in time to solve a great mystery. She thought of how much she'd rather be down the White Rabbit, having a pint of two and playing on the pub's quiz machine.

8

The Time and Tide

Neil Corry

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

So there's this bloke, comes in the pub – it's getting a bit busy, the usual suspects and a few tourists – and he starts shouting the odds demanding to know where this bird is and what we've done to her. Me and Wilksy haven't the first clue what he's talking about. Right little

mental case. Short stuff; stupid hat, and jumping from table to table giving everyone what he must reckon is this hard-man stare, then

shaking his head and moving on.

Once he's finished his circuit of the pub, he starts shouting, 'Ace!

Ace!' is the point me and Wilksy look at each other and realise the man is a few beers short of a barrel.

Paddy, the landlord, is serving a couple of punters. He's been in the pub business most of his life, right? If he can handle us lot before kick-off, he can definitely sort out this little weirdo. Still hasn't lost his Dublin accent after living in Fulham for the best part of thirty years, and has been running the Time and Tide for about ten of them. So, Paddy is serving this fella who looks like a right fool, suit and all – and on a Sunday? – with his missus/girlfriend/whatever, and without

looking up Paddy says in that gentle brogue that you always hear no matter where you are in the pub, 'Doctor,' saying the word like it's the bloke's name not a job, 'you'll behave yourself, won't ya? I'm trying to run a pub here.'

The little bloke in the hat stops stock-still. He's kind of hard to take your eyes off but, anyways, me and Wilksy don't mind a bit of

entertainment. After what we were on last night, and having next-to-no ruddy sleep coz of Wilksy's missus kicking up a fuss, the beer's going down slowly this afternoon. The game's in an hour and we're just

killing time, waiting for the lads. I'm not fond of watching a match with my head feeling like it's been put on backwards. And it's a derby.

The noise is going to be seriously mental.

Talking of mental: the bloke, right? He slowly turns and stares at 9

Paddy, taking him in, every detail: his bald, shiny head, the nose that I reckon has been smacked a few times, and the round, bright blue eyes that never miss a trick. It's like it's the first time the little fella's seen a human being.

His stare is well weird and, for a second, I can't look at him. I don't want to look at him. I catch sight of Take That and Torvill and Dean on the pull-down screen at the side of the room. I'm grateful the

sound's off.

'Have we met before, Mr...?'

He's Scottish. Probably around Inverness. I'm good with accents.

Ask anyone.

He comes up to the bar, next to where me and Wilksy are cradling

our beers. Never have two pints of Stella gone down so slowly. I'm getting old. I light up another Camel Blue. Only be a few months and I won't be able to do that in here any more.

Paddy's serving another couple of customers – look like a right pair of wrong 'uns – as he answers this little doctor's question: 'Never met ya before in my long life, fella, but it doesn't take a genius to work out who you are if you can burst in here like that.'

Which sounds a bit weird, dunnit?

The prat in the hat – and the stupidest sweater – raises his eyebrows but says nothing. It's like he's not used to being second-guessed.

Paddy finishes serving the likely lads who head for the jukebox. He picks up a bar towel and wipes up a bit of spillage.

'Bet you're wondering where she is, eh?'

'I'd like a glass of water, please.'

Paddy smiles. It's like they're playing a game.

'Bottled, or will tap do you?'

'A bottle would be appreciated.'

'Sparkling or still?'

A bottle of water sounds like a good idea right now. This Stella isn't going down well. I catch Wilksy's eye, but he says nothing. He's never the most talkative bloke. Bit of hassle in the army, years back. Saw something he wasn't supposed to. Apparently. That's what that Davies says, but half the stuff Davies says comes out of his backside and the other half stinks as bad. Wilksy's just watching the little fella.

'I'll, um, push the boat out,' he says. 'Sparkling, please. And then you

can tell me what you've done with Ace.'

Paddy turns, bends down to the fridge, grabs a bottle, turns again to reach up for a glass on a shelf, then uses it to scoop a few cubes of ice up from the ice bucket, all in one smooth movement.

'On the house,' he says, placing the glass and bottle silently on the bar.

10

Wilksy raises his eyebrows. Paddy's never given anyone a drink for free – and I've put more dosh behind that bar than I really want to think about. He won't even let his regulars – like yours truly – run a tab. 'Neither a lender nor a borrower be,' he says. Tightwad.

Anyway, the little man doesn't touch his drink, just keeps his hands in the pockets of this off-white suit jacket.

'Where's Ace?'

Paddy taps his left temple. 'In here.'

And I haven't a Danny La Rue what's going on. I reckon I'm more

hung over than I thought. Still, hair of the dog and all that. I take another mouthful of Stella. It doesn't hit the spot. Even my halt hurts this afternoon.

'You're maintaining a relatively simple but inherently unstable

spacio-temporal anomaly with the power of your mind?'

Well, that's what I think the little chap says. The words came

rushing out of his head as if he can't say them fast enough.

Paddy shuffles his feet, looking down, as if he's embarrassed or

something. 'Doctor, you'll be having me blushing, so you will. You'll have to excuse me; I've got customers to serve.'

He goes off to the far side of the long, curved wooden bar to serve a couple of girls. Look like sisters. Not bad, not bad at all. Not for now, though. The game's in an hour. Got to get your priorities right.

'Do you know,' says the little man, turning to us, 'where you are?'

Wilksy looks puzzled for a minute then tells him where to go –

although exactly where would be biologically impossible, if you get my drift. Anyways, that shuts him up, but only for a moment

'I think you fail to recognise the gravity of the situation,' he begins, adding a few extra Rs to 'recognise' which makes me remember my

geography teacher, Mr Ashdown, at school. Anyway, I stop this little fella carrying on, raising my free hand with the fag in it towards his face.

'Oi, mate, the only gravity I'm interested in is the one to do with my beer. Now, on your way, back to the hospital or wherever you've come from. And don't be bothering anyone else or you'll be out on your backside.'

'Now, now,' he replies. 'Violence will never get you anywhere.'

So I put down my beer on the bar, turn round and knock him out

cold.

Paddy never takes kindly to his customers getting flattened, but this time he doesn't mind at all. He rushes round to the front of the bar and laughs a sharp, loud laugh when he sees the unconscious Doctor who's somehow managed to keep his hat on when he'd crumpled to the

ground.

'Sorry, Paddy. I didn't mean to hit him so hard. He just, kinda,

pushed my buttons.'

'That's quite all right, lad. From what I've heard that's what you'd call his specialist subject.'

'You know him, then?'

That was Wilksy, volunteering a few rare words.

Paddy grabs a bar towel and starts wiping the blood off the fella's face and off his now even more off-white jacket.

‘Only know of him,’ he says stuffing the end of the towel down the back of his shirt and grabbing the little man under each armpit. He plonks him into an empty chair. The little fella looks like a puppet whose strings have been cut. The pub’s gone quiet, everyone looking around, not wanting to get involved. That’s London for you. You can get away with anything in this city coz everyone looks away. Some old Travis track starts on the jukebox. Just what my head doesn’t need.

‘Mind you,’ Paddy adds, ‘I’ve got to say that I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes when he wakes up.’

‘Why’s that then?’

Wilksy again. There’s no shutting him up, all of a sudden.

‘You,’ and with that Paddy stabs a finger towards me, ‘have only

just flattened one of the most powerful people you’re ever likely to meet. I’ve got collateral and he won’t mess with me, but you –’ Again with the finger. Someone else is pushing buttons. ‘You barely have two brain cells to rub together.’

I don’t have time to react as the little Doctor comes round,

murmuring something like, ‘Och, no...’

Suddenly he’s on his feet, looking like he’s possessed. And I

remember that you have to be careful around nutters. You never know what they might do, what they’re capable of. Still, if he tries anything on, I’m nigh on a foot taller and four – probably five – stone heavier.

I’ll have him.

‘How dare you!’ he shouts. The pub chat that had started up dies

down again. He sees the blood all down his front. ‘You’ve ruined this jacket!’

‘Doctor, please calm down,’ says Paddy quietly.

‘I will not calm down!’

He clocks everyone staring at him and sits down sharpish. Good for him. I didn’t want to have to smack him again. He’s already not going to like that shiner he’ll have in the morning.

I'm trying to remember what follows but it never sounds right.

Sounded like a load of bull at the time.

'Where's Ace?' he growls at Paddy.

'Safe. For now.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'This is my home, Time Lord. You aren't taking it away from me.'

'It'll dissipate in time. Everything does, didn't you know?'

'Oh, you can bend the laws of thermo-(something-or-other) if you know the right people.'

'I'm impressed. So all this is stable?'

'More or less. The (didn't catch the word) can withstand any (something) leakage. And where's your ship?'

'I'm asking the questions.'

'And I'm the one with your friend in my head.'

Now that last bit I can't have heard right but I'm sure it's what he says. Wilksy turns to me and asks, 'You getting anything of this?'

'Barely a dickie bird, mate. Shall we get off?'

'Nah, there's something up here. We've got plenty of time before kick-off. Let's keep an eye on this fella. He's trouble. Looks like he wouldn't say boo to the proverbial, but there's something going on.'

And that's the most I've ever heard Wilksy say in one go. God's honest.

'He's a mental case,' I reckon. 'That's what's going on.'

Paddy walks past us, slips behind the bar and makes to serve Big

Fred – he's only five-foot-four but popular with the ladies –who's with a bloke I don't recognise but he's in Chelsea colours. Introductions later.

Then this Doctor slaps his palms on the table and shouts at Paddy:

'Do these people know where they are? What you're doing to them?'

The pub gets quiet again. An early Coldplay track is playing. Who put this on? I'm suddenly feeling wiped out, like the life's draining out of me. I don't think I'm going to make the game all of a sudden. I finish my beer and get ready to order more. Wilksy nods for another.

Maybe a quiet afternoon in the pub's a good idea. The footy can sort itself out. Got to stop caning it on Saturday nights. I'm 37 – I'm no kid any more.

I'm stood next to the Doctor as I put out my ciggie and call for

Paddy and two more Stellas when he's ready when the little fella turns to me and shoots his finger right to the centre of my head. I just see white for a moment and then he pulls away, looking a bit puzzled. I go to smack him again but, if anything, I feel a thousand times better than I did five seconds ago. I let him off this time.

'February 25th, 2007,' he murmurs, and then gives me a puzzled

look.

Paddy comes over. 'Doctor, you could've just asked the man.'

Quick as a flash, the Doctor reaches over and does the same to

Paddy. Suddenly the whole room goes white, like it's not there. Like it's never been there. The bar's just gone. There's no one there. No one. The two tasty sisters have gone. Big Fred and his mate have

vanished. The two dodgy lads sat by the jukebox are gone. The

jukebox is gone. Everyone's gone. Every *thing* has gone. I start to panic. Where are the walls? Where's the *floor*? Have I passed out? Am I dreaming? I don't know. Then a couple of shadows in the white

appear, slowly getting darker and timing into Paddy and the Doctor.

Paddy's smiling. The Doctor isn't. More shadows form, and I see Big Fred, but where's his mate? And where's Wilksy?

Then, just as fast, we're back in the room. Everyone looks startled, drinks are spilt, there are small shouts and screams. Someone almost faints. I'm thinking of joining them.

'What the –' says Wilksy, right by my side.

'I'd be grateful if you didn't swear,' interrupts the Doctor. 'It's a coarse habit and there are ladies present.'

'Oi, Professor! Who are you calling a lady?'

With both my hands on the bar stopping me from falling – again, I feel like death warmed up – I look back and see this girl in an

oversized black bomber jacket, short black skirt and stripy tights. I haven't seen her come in. What's weird is she's practically the spit of my sister, but, like, from the eighties! She dressed just like that when my Ellen used to, what, 15, 16? Easily 20 years ago. Serious timewarp.

'So which one's the bilge-bag who snatched me?' she asks. She's

got a rucksack over her shoulder with a baseball bat sticking out of it.

She must think she looks hard or something, but she sounds like a kid.

Checking her out, I spot a Charlton Athletic badge among the

collection pinned to her jacket and feel a bit of sympathy what with their place in the Premiership and all, but her accent's well West London. What's she doing following the Addicks?

The Doctor pipes up and, in a low growl, he snarls, 'Get away from me!'

The look on this girl's face is priceless. Like someone kicked a

puppy.

'Professor?'

She reaches out to him but he backs away, and fast, banging into the bar. 'Whatever you're up to, Paddy, or whatever your name is,' growls the Doctor, 'you'll stop this abomination this minute.'

Paddy's cleaning glasses behind the bar and doesn't look at him, just checks if there's any smearing on a pint pot. 'Can't do that, Doctor.

I've got thirsty customers and I don't reckon you're going anywhere, Time Lord or no Time Lord.'

This Doctor looks like he's about to explode. 'You think you can

defeat me?'

'Who's going to help you? You've no chance here.'

'Professor,' says the girl, 'this isn't funny. What are you doing?'

He gives the pony-tailed teenager a cold, brutal look. I can't be sure but I reckon Paddy's holding his breath. I know I'm holding mine.

'What am I doing?' He smiles. It ain't friendly. 'I'm winning.'

Then he stands straight up, closes both eyes and falls backwards and, once more, is spark out on the fag-burned, beer-stained carpet. And I didn't even touch him.

Paddy's round the front of the bar again in a flash. The girl's hovering over him, shaking him by the shoulders. 'Come on, Professor! You

can't do this to me.'

But there's not a sign of movement from the little fella. Paddy looks at the girl and asks, 'What's he done now?'

The girl, her brow furrowed, shrugs her shoulders angrily and shouts at Paddy, 'He can't do this to me!'

'He just collapsed,' says Wilksy. Full marks for stating the bleeding obvious.

The rest of the pub isn't so quiet any more. There's something very wrong here and I'm certain everyone can feel it. A couple of people are hovering around us, looking at the unconscious Doctor. Paddy gives him a sharp slap.

'Come on, Doctor! You've got to wake up. The rest of you, you can return to your tables. He'll be all right.'

The few people who'd had a nosey back off. If Paddy says the

situation's under control, then so be it.

'It's nothing to do with me this time, Paddy,' I say. Just for

something to say, nervous like. The little fella looks as if he's dead. I can't see him breathing.

The girl turns to me, her face a mix of annoyance and, I think,

contempt.

'You don't understand!'

Wilksy laughs. 'He wouldn't, would he?'

For a second I think he's backing me up, but the way he laughs

makes me think these two know something I don't. Buttons are being pushed again. I can feel the adrenalin rising. An ex of mine told me that I don't have a flight-or-fight instinct, just a fight instinct. It was one of the few times when she wasn't wrong.

'What you two on about?'

But I don't get an answer as the whole pub shakes. What? The

tremors keep rumbling. An earthquake? In Fulham? A table goes over, glasses too, there are shouts of surprise. The worst is when, right in 15

front of me, and I swear this is no lie, I swear it on my mother's grave, God rest her, the girl roars. The noise is like that of an animal, a lion in pain, maybe, but so loud it's almost deafening. Everyone in the place puts their hands to their heads trying to block it out. Her mouth opens wider and wider then she starts to fade to white and I can see right through her. This can't be happening. And then there's this wispy ghost of a figure hovering in the air until that, too, is gone.

I'll tell you this for nothing: I've never been so terrified in my life.

I'm blabbering: 'Did you just see what happened to her? Where'd

she go? What's happening? Did you see that? Did you?'

Paddy turns to Wilksy. 'She couldn't maintain the link. He's shut himself off somehow. Devious little so-and-so.'

‘And the tremor?’

I butt in: ‘Wilksy! Did you see that?’

Wilksy doesn’t look happy at all as he turns to me. ‘Oi, mate – shut it! Paddy – what’s going on?’

‘I don’t ruddy know, do I? But my money’s on the little fella here.

Mark my words. You don’t get more devious than this little lot.’

‘Can you make him stop?’

‘I don’t know. But I have to, don’t I? Still, I’ve got a good

bargaining chip – his friend. The gloves are off. Keep an eye on your one and I’ll see what I can do about him.’

I’m not happy with Wilksy. No one talks to me like that. Not even a mate like him. ‘What’s he mean, “your one”? And did you see what

happened to that bird? Did you see?’

Then there’s another tremor. The building shakes. Then another

tremor and the lights go off, the jukebox falls silent. The electric must’ve shorted or something. The tremors stop and everything’s still.

I’d say you could hear a pin drop but all I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears and my heart pounding. All the time the Doctor’s just lying on the carpet, oblivious to it all.

Then, through the smoke-glass windows there’s a blaring light, like what you’d reckon would happen if the bomb fell. But the light doesn’t stop, it gets brighter, so bright that it’s hard to see, I have to cover my eyes. Everyone’s doing the same and trying to End some sort of cover, pinning themselves to walls. The light’s so bright that any colour in the place is being bleached out, like the contrast on your TV is set too high.

“Flamin’ Nora, Wilksy! We’ve got to get out of here! That’s a

bomb!”

But I know it’s not It’s something much worse and I don’t think I’m going to be able to deal with it.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ insists Wilksy and then, it’s weird, I 16

really don’t want to go anywhere. I sit myself on the floor, shielding my eyes, then see Paddy who’s shaking the Doctor by his jacket lapels, but he doesn’t wake up, just flops about as the landlord shouts at him,

‘Wake up, you little –’

There’s another tremor – much, much worse this time. Part of the

pub roof caves in and a huge beam comes crashing down, narrowly

missing the two girls, one them is screaming and just not stopping. The other girl’s holding on to her mate, but her face isn’t showing any fear at all. Must be in shock. Don’t know how my head is keeping going.

This is just mental, mental, MENTAL. Am I in shock? There’s a huge crack of wood and suddenly there a massive split running along the bar. Bottles and glasses on the back of the bar wall fall and smash, or just crack where they stand. There’s glass everywhere, and there’s this long, groaning noise, deep and never stopping. The building’s

screaming. I’m sure it’s about to collapse any second.

Wilksy grabs me by the shoulders, looks straight in my eyes. ‘Stay put, you.’ And I stay put, but every part of me is screaming at me to get out of the place. And I thought I didn’t have the flight instinct? And why isn’t anyone else running for the doom? Coz what’s outside might be worse? I see Paddy on his knees pulling the Doctor to a sitting-up position, but the fella’s unconscious and his head just lolls backward,

‘Come on, Doctor!’ Look! I’ll set her free. Just stop whatever you’re doing! Please!’ It sounds like the landlord is begging for his life. Is it this Doctor who’s causing the tremors, the blinding light, making the pub fall apart? But how? He’s spark out!

Then the girl is back. Right by my side and right out of thin air. I think for a second that I am going to go right out of my head and never return. I think I’d be safer that way. The world’s gone mad and I’m about to go with it. The girl’s unsteady on her Doc Martin boots as the tremors, lighter now, still rumble on. She falls flat on her bum. The look on her face is almost funny. We all turn to her.

‘Bit cramped in there, Paddy. You had enough yet?’ She looks right at me and says something mental. ‘And you’re human, yeah? We’ll

have you out in a minute – won't we, Professor?

And the Doctor's not spark out any more. Wide awake, he stares

hard at Paddy for a second, then pushes himself out of Paddy's

clutches and jumps to his feet.

'Last orders, Paddy: let these people go. Haven't you realised? I'm (something or other) that's holding this place together. You're not going to be able to draw anyone here again.'

'How are you doing that? And what gives you the right?'

'The right?' he demands, adding a few too many Rs. 'I'll tell you what gives me the right, Paddy so-called O'Brien with your name

above the door of the Time and Tide. You're feeding on intelligent beings as if they were cattle.'

Paddy sneers at him and shouts over the noise of the tremors, shouts of the customers and things breaking. 'Get off your high horse, Doctor.

I know what you are. I know what you and your lot get up to. Act as if butter wouldn't melt but wipe out star systems, time-loop planets, muck up a bloke's history if you don't like the look of them. And I could tell you things you don't even know about your lot. Don't be threatening me. I could unravel your future right now.'

But the Doctor doesn't seem to be listening to a word he's saying, and I'm not making much sense out of it.

'I won't allow you to play with the fates of these people's lives.

Their destinies lie elsewhere. You're unravelling threads that could cause untold damage. You've no right to play God, all the time sucking the life out of them. These people you've trapped have their own

futures.'

But that I think I kind of understand. Wilksy's stood behind me,

saying nothing, just staring at the two men arguing. I'm on the floor, the bird's next to me and I whisper (I don't know why I'm whispering,

I just am, okay?), ‘This is all Paddy’s fault? How? He’s just the landlord, isn’t he? And do you know what’s happening outside?’

‘There isn’t an outside. And he’s something more than a landlord.’

‘You’re a nutter.’

‘Probably, but at least I haven’t got the brains of a seaside donkey.’

Good line. I’ll have to remember it if we get out. I whisper back, ‘So where’s that light coming from, then?’

The girl, who’s never taken her eyes off the Doctor and Paddy, just says, ‘Mate, you don’t want to know.’

The argument between them’s getting more intense, with Paddy

shouting, ‘If you’re going to send me to Hell, Doctor, then I’m taking the lot of you with me!’

Wilksy steps forward, ‘You can’t do that!’ he shouts, and I’m not sure who he’s talking to, the Doctor or Paddy. But the Doctor, even louder, shouts, ‘It doesn’t have to be like this!’

The girl’s up on her feet, and picks up the baseball bat from her backpack and holds on to what’s left of the bar. Paddy’s got his arms raised to the ceiling, his eyes are closed and the tremors, which had just been rumbling in the background, suddenly get much worse.

‘You’re making me do it! If I can’t have this place, none of you are getting out of here alive!’

And the light outside gets even brighter. It’s almost too much. But then I see that the wallpaper is slowly turning to dust, revealing brickwork which itself torus to dust, then revealing even more white

light. The dust whirls in the air above Paddy, and there’s more and more of it. It’s happening to the bar, to the floor, the photos on the walls of the area from times gone by, the pull-down TV screen, the glasses and tables. Everything is turning into dust which is whooshing around the landlord like a mini-tornado.

The Doctor looks even angrier. ‘Paddy! Don’t say I didn’t warn

you!’

I hear something, like a cross between a roar and a howl. I think I know what I'm going to see when I turn around. It's Wilksy. He isn't there any more. Instead, there's this ghost thing, like the girl turned into before she reappeared (that's just mad, isn't it? Just mad). I see more ghosts in the pub, each with a friend they came in with. What are those things? Is this going to happen to me? Am I dead? Is this Hell?

I realise I'm panicking and being as much use as a fart in a colander but never in all my days have I seen anything like it. The tornado is whipping around Paddy, it's growing denser and he's becoming harder to make out.

The Doctor looks at him. He's all stern, then shakes his head. 'Ace, get ready to run.'

'What about the others?'

Then the Doctor stands up in the howling storm within the pub, dust everywhere, everything turning to dust. The ghosts are fading into nothing and nothing makes sense at all.

'Everyone!' he shouts, 'Get ready to run!'

I don't know if anyone can hear him but everyone turns to the little Doctor who, back straight, like the storm is happening to someone else, points this torch thing at the pub's double doors. After a second, they slam right open and there's glass smashing everywhere and that too turns into dust. I want to cover my face but I can't move. I just can't move.

There's no outside. I shouldn't be surprised but I am. Where's the Fulham Broadway? Things are getting even weirder. There's just a

room. A white room, with circle indents covering the walls

everywhere. There's this thing, this computery-thing to one side of the room, a glass or plastic column rising and falling.

'Your TARDIS!'

That's Paddy, his voice booming out, coming from the centre of the tornado that's ripping apart the pub. I know that none of this is real but something's making me feel certain of the white room. It's shouting

‘safe’. Everything will be all right once we get in there. I pick myself up off the floor; others are doing the same. One of the sisters, one of the dodgy lads, Big Fred, and so on and so on. Their drinking partners have all turned to ghosts and vanished. We all head for the double 19

doors, but we’re battling against the wind in the room, the vicious dust is ripping at our faces and clothes but we know where we have to go.

I hear the Doctor shouting at Paddy but I can’t make out the words.

The girl, Ace, tries to help me up. The doors are only feet away but they might as well be miles. There’s less and less of the pub, just white. There’s barely any floor. There’s a bridge of carpet to the double doors and the weird room. God, I want to be dreaming. I want to wake up. Please.

‘Come on, you donkey!’ shouts Ace, ‘Stop dreaming and move!’

And then I’m in the room. I’ve crawled along the pub floor and I’ve made it. There’s a hum of engines. I hear strange bleeps from the computer whatever-it-is. Turning around, I think everyone’s got out.

Ace is there and shouts out, ‘Come on, Professor! Job done!’

And all I see is the little fella arguing madly with the tornado, his arms flapping about, jumping up and down. Then he just stops and

stares at the tornado. Then he turns around and walks towards us. The white enveloping the pub as he steps into the room.

‘Close the doors, Ace.’

I don’t see Big Fred any more. He stopped going to games after that.

No one’s seen hide nor hair of him for months now. I started seeing one of the birds who was in the pub for a while but her memories of her so-called sister and my memories of Wilksy made things weird. We were the only ones who understood what we were going through and

then we were the only ones who kept reminding each other of what had happened. I’ll never forget Wilksy’s ghost screaming in my face and I wish, I wish, I wish I could.

The Doctor said we’d had our heads messed with – not that hard to work out. It still feels messed up if truth be told. I can’t explain what

happened to us. But the Doctor fella says we'd been snatched out of space and time by Paddy who, he says, wasn't really a human being at all, and, of course, it wasn't a real pub. He tried to tell us what it was all about, that Wilksy and the rest were things feeding on our life force, but I was just glad it was over.

I remember I almost panicked when he opened the doors again. Ha!

But instead of the screaming, howling wind from the room and that bizarre tornado there really was the Fulham Broadway. I could've

wept. I do know we all ran outside, almost crying with relief. Traffic, people, noise, pollution, London, lovely. There was no sign of the Time and Tide. I guess there never should've been.

Bit weird stepping out of a blue box, though.

The Doctor came out to join us and tapped me on the shoulder. 'I

think you should know the date. It's 10 am, Sunday 25 February 2007.'

I didn't get what he was trying to say. 'I think you're supposed to be in Cardiff this afternoon,' he added, putting a finger to his lips and harrowing his brow. 'I'm sure it's the Carling Cup final.'

Then the girl, Ace, stepped out and reminded me of Ellen again.

'So it's the not a derby with Tottenham this afternoon, then?' But I didn't really care about the answer.

'No, no, no, not at all. Those... creatures... were making you think what they wanted you to.'

Then I remembered I had a ticket for the game waiting for me at

home.

'You better get a move on,' says the girl.

'Yes, the trains are going to be a pain.'

But I looked at Ace and this weird man who was smiling at me (and who I'd knocked out about, what, twenty minutes ago) and went, 'Nah, not today. Today's for getting back to normal, innit? And sorry

for hitting you.'

And I walked off, desperate to see my sister and my niece and

nephew over in Twickenham. Everyone else who'd been in the 'pub'

had melted away already. I turned back one last time to see the blue box slowly vanishing. I think something clicked in my head, then, but I wasn't about to go doolally not after what I'd seen.

Then I realised not one of us had thanked him or the girl. I felt a bit sorry about that. But Paddy had said the man had a reputation, didn't he? He was probably doing stuff like that all the time. I just hope he doesn't meet too many blokes like me who keep smacking him one,

coz that shiner's gonna be a beauty!

21

Emily stepped out of the TARDIS and looked across the river.

'We haven't moved, Doctor,' she said as he ushered Will out of the police box and slicked the door shut.

'Not in space, no,' he said. 'We're still in London, by the Thames. But it's 1957.'

'But that's mad,' said Will. 'I mean, a few hours ago –from our point of view

– we were in this city but during the war. It's now 55 years later.'

'Never mind that, Hoffman,' said Emily. 'What makes you think the answer to this is here, Doctor? UNIT didn't even exist in the 1950s. Look, our headquarters aren't even there yet.'

'True. But it's as good a place as any, isn't it?'

They wandered around the area for a few minutes, up and down the river –

Emily and Will always following the Doctor, who seemed to dash off purposefully only to realise he wasn't going anywhere specific. Emily wasn't surprised. She'd worked with the Doctor a few times now, had read reports on him, had talked to old-school UNIT soldiers who's been around when the Doctor helped them pretty regularly. He was an odd man, that much was obvious. But Emily had to remind herself that he wasn't actually a

man. No man she'd ever met had taken her on a trip to the Mimsphere, or asked her to create a cover story for a living bust of Nero in an Italian museum. No man could travel in time or regenerate into a new body.

'The archives,' Will suddenly said. 'Where would they be now? Did UNIT

take over army records or something?'

The Doctor spun round and beamed at his new friend. 'Of course! William Hoffman, you are a genius!' He turned to Emily. 'Come on now, Colonel Chaudhry – you must know.'

'Know what?'

'The UNIT archives, where we found the lacuna. Where are they kept in 1957?'

Emily wracked her exhausted brain. She'd researched the history of UNIT

when she was drafted in; she was, after all, head of its public relations. A spark of memory flashed across her mind.

'In Whitehall,' she said. 'The Ministry of Defence.'

'Excellent! I'm sure they won't mind us asking a few questions.' The Doctor paced away at speed, heading for Westminster Bridge. 'Come along, you two!'

Emily and Will exchanged dubious looks.

'He always like this, Colonel?' asked Will.

'Most of the time, Hoffman.'

As they jogged to catch up, Emily realised the Doctor was still talking to them.

'... London in the 1950s, many times of course. I was here for the Festival of Britain, and the Stanley Matthews cup final and the coronation. Yes, I've always loved London in the fifties!'

22

Losing the Audience

Mat Coward

This was idiotic, and he knew he looked like a fool or worse, scurrying through the autumn shadows. But, all the same, there was something about the whole business that rang a bell up and down his spine. So Max carried on following the woman through the unlit alleys of the West End. He'd chosen her because he guessed from her awkward

posture and her half-hearted smile that she'd be walking alone from the theatre, to her bus or Tube or tiny flat. She wasn't the first one he'd followed, though she was the easiest to keep in view, despite the misty drizzle, with her old-fashioned feather hat sticking up like a periscope.

Nothing had happened to any of the others, male or female, and

probably nothing would happen to this one. Still, he followed.

It was cold and getting colder, and Max was suddenly aware that he was in his late thirties, not his early twenties any more, and that this was all based on a feeling which he couldn't even identify to himself, let alone tell anyone about. Just a feeling that these events – if they were events, and not merely tricks of his mind, cousins to the

nightmares that woke him three nights out of four– were in some way related to his war work.

The feather-hatted woman was gaining a good lead over Max, who

was hampered by ignorance of her route, and by his need for

discretion. In a minute she'd disappear round one too many corners and he'd have lost her. The others were waiting for him at the Captain's Cabin, where they always gathered after the recordings. He could

picture them at their table at the back, gusts of laughter periodically blowing holes in the surrounding curtain of cigarette smoke to reveal his 'tight little unit', reinforcing their friendships through the traditional methods of alcohol and mutual insult.

They all thought he was phoning his bookie. Except Maxine; he

wasn't sure what she thought about him any more, except that

whatever it was it made her sad and worried.

And now they were crossing a bomb site, and his shoes were

leaking. *Time to pack it in*.

But even as his feet abandoned the pursuit, his eyes caught a flicker of movement up ahead, ten yards to the right of the feather hat, and closing in on it fast. Weird-looking bloke too, from what Max could see of his outline and his peculiar way of moving. She hadn't seen him coming, that was for sure.

Max's heart was beating a rhythm he hadn't heard for over a decade, and it got louder as the woman suddenly disappeared. She'd obviously taken a turning to the left, invisible from Max's distance. He sprinted after her, but as he turned the corner into a Victorian garden square he immediately realised he'd made an embarrassing mistake: the feather hat and the peculiar man were standing in the middle of the opening, locked together in a passionate, trembling embrace. They were doing what the lads in Max's wartime outfit had called 'the blackout waltz'.

He ducked out of sight, and caught his breath, his hands on his

knees. Idiot! They weren't hunter and prey – they were just lovers. He chuckled at his own stupidity: 'The secret war made you paranoid, old son,' he told himself.

Even so, as he trudged his way back towards the inviting, beery fug of the Captain's Cabin, he still couldn't quite shake that feeling: that something had followed him home from the war.

'Yes, yes,' said the Doctor. 'I think that's it. That's surely it. Quite probably.' He wriggled out from under the main console, clutching a spaghetti mess of purple wire in one hand and a transformer in the other. Straightening himself, he muttered, 'Let's find out, shall we?'

'Grandfather?' Susan had returned to the TARDIS, after passing a

mildly diverting half hour exploring the Totter's Lane junkyard in which their ship was concealed, just in time to see the Doctor threading the stripped end of the purple wire through an aqua-spanner, and

preparing to plug the spanner into the transformer. 'What are you doing?'

‘Not now, child. Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘Grandfather, are you sure that’s safe?’

Irritation crinkled the old man’s brow. ‘This is my ship! When the time comes that I need advice from foolish girls on how to run it, you may take me into deep space and push me out of a porthole. Until then, kindly be quiet.’

Susan was careful to keep her sigh silent. She braced herself against the wall of the control room, and awaited the inevitable. Her

grandfather’s unfamiliarity with the old ship’s workings frustrated him, she knew; and she also knew that his usual response to frustration was 24

reckless experimentation.

‘There,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think that’s fixed it, my dear.’ Two seconds later, a flash of blue-green light filled the room, and the floor rocked under their feet.

‘Are you all right, Grandfather?’

‘How curious,’ was the Doctor’s only reply. ‘I wonder why that

happened.’

The crowd had been thinner again tonight, Max reckoned – unless that was just his imagination tormenting him. Either way, the woman in the feather hat wasn’t there, the one he’d followed after the previous week’s recording, he was sure of that: he’d had a good look for her. It seemed to him there were familiar faces missing from the studio

audience every week these days.

After tonight’s show, he’d told Maxine and the others that he’d left his cigarette lighter in the green room, that they should get him a pint in and he’d catch them up. From the look on Maxine’s face, it’d been clear she hadn’t believed his excuse. He hated lying to her, and hated worrying her even more, but he *had* to know what was going on. He was going to have to go on another patrol tonight.

Backstage at the subterranean Paris, he was just slipping his arms into his overcoat when he heard an extraordinary wheezing, trumpeting noise – it sounded, he thought, like an elephant telling a joke, and

came from the direction of the green room. Odd – there hadn't been any elephants in there a couple of minutes earlier, when he'd popped in to collect his coat.

Mind you, *that* hadn't been there, either, he thought, as he looked into the room: a blue police call box, standing at the far end of the room, not much less out of place than an elephant would have been. A television prop, presumably, delivered to the wrong department.

The door of the police box opened, and out stepped a girl with short, dark hair, dressed rather like a teenager in an American film. 'Hello,'

she said, spotting Max. 'Would you mind telling me where this is?'

'I suspect you're a bit off course,' said Max. 'This is the Paris Studio.' The girl was evidently none the wiser – she must be a

complete newcomer to the BBC – so he added: 'Lower Regent Street?

It's a theatre where we record radio programmes that need a live

audience.'

'Oh, London,' she said, looking slightly disappointed.

Max laughed. Just how lost was she? 'Afraid so. What were you

hoping for – Timbuktu?'

'At the very least,' she said. 'This may sound like a silly question, but what year is it?'

'On the contrary,' Max assured her, 'as I spent the afternoon

lunching with the Deputy Head of Variety (Radio), I can tell you that's nowhere near the silliest question I've heard today.' Ile walked towards her, his hand outstretched. 'It's 1955, and I'm Max Wheeler.'

One thing the war had taught Max – a lesson undermined only

slightly by a decade in show business – was to accept the validity of first impressions. He liked this girl; she seemed sweet, but lively with it. She didn't strike him as pushy, but neither was she coy or

apologetic. She no doubt had her own reasons for asking completely

mad questions, and she clearly didn't much care how they might sound to other people. He and Maxine hadn't had children – just as well, as it turned out – but if he had had a daughter, he wouldn't have minded one like this.

The girl gave him a big smile and shook his hand firmly. 'I'm Susan.

Pleased to meet you.'

The police box door opened again, disgorging an old man with long, white hair and wearing Victorian costume. Good lord, thought Max, how many of them did that thing contain? It was obviously a pretty high-class prop. The Victorian gent quickly closed the door.

'Oh, and this is my grandfather,' said Susan. 'He's the Doctor.'

A stage name, Max presumed. The chap was undoubtedly either an

actor or a comic, and some of these old boys would rather die than step out of character, on stage or off.

'Max Wheeler – pleased to meet you, Doctor. I think,' he added, out of politeness, 'I might have seen your act, before the war.'

The Doctor ignored him entirely, and turned to Susan. 'When and

where, hmm? Have you found out, or have you been wasting your time on chit-chat, as usual?'

'The Paris Studio, Lower Regent Street, London, 1955,' Susan

replied, apparently taking no offence at her grandfather's rudeness.

The Doctor clearly wasn't pleased by the information. 'Ridiculous,'

he muttered. 'London, 1955? Backwards and sideways? Absurd.'

'I know what you mean.' Susan gave a sulky sigh. 'All of space and time to choose from, and what do we manage? A few miles, and less than a decade. Still, we might as well have a look around now we're here. You wouldn't mind showing us around, would you, Max?'

'Delighted,' said Max – and he was. The gods of comedy had sent

him a charming lunatic to take his mind off things. Who was he to spurn their gift? And he liked the way she used his first name without asking his permission. If there was one thing Max Wheeler couldn't

stand, it was deference.

The Doctor turned back to the police box prop. ‘Oh, you must do as you wish, young lady. Yes, you go off and enjoy yourself, don’t you 26

worry about me. If you want me, which I don’t suppose you shall,

you’ll find me here, working on the TARDIS.’ At the door of the blue box, he turned to wave a finger at his granddaughter. ‘But hear me, girl. I shall be finished in half an hour, and if you’re not here I’ll leave without you. Yes, I shall.’

‘Don’t mind Grandfather,’ Susan whispered, as the old man

vanished back inside his police box. ‘He gets grumpy when he thinks time and space are mucking him about.’

Laughing, Max said, ‘My dear, I know the feeling.’

‘It’s a sort of recorded radio show,’ Max explained. The funny girl was charmingly ignorant about show business – it was no wonder she’d

managed to deliver a TV prop to a radio studio. You’d think her

granddad might have known better, with all his years in the game, but perhaps the poor old boy’s mind wasn’t quite what it might have been.

Max had known a bloke on the halls who went senile, which was very sad bemuse he made his living with a memory act. ‘Magnificanus the Mentalist’ – kept turning up at the wrong theatres.

Still, he was a bit surprised that a girl her age hadn’t even *heard* of *Anyway, As I Say*. Had they really become so old-hat, so soon? Or perhaps eccentricity ran in Susan’s family. ‘The Doctor’ –what sort of act could that be? Magician, possibly. Card tricks and funny mirrors.

‘ *Anyway* is in its seventh year,’ he told her, as they stood at the back of the auditorium, looking down the darkened ranks of seats towards the small stage. ‘It enjoys what they call a “following”, which means that not many people like it but those who do like it a lot.’ And even its following was waning, if he was honest. Intellectual comedy fans were a fickle lot, always looking out for the next thing, and the mass of wireless listeners had never quite fallen in love with *Anyway*.

‘Is it just you in the show?’

‘There’s two of us regulars: Max and Maxine, we used to be a cross-

talk duo just after the war. We like to think what we do now is a little more advanced. But of course it's no good asking you bemuse you've never heard us.'

'Sorry,' said Susan. 'I'll listen to the next one if I possibly can, I promise. Is Maxine your wife?'

'Tone of voice gave me away, I suppose? She used to be. Now we're back to being just partners, and good friends, which was how it should always have stayed.'

'Why are you divorced, if you're so friendly?'

'We're so friendly because we're divorced,' said Max, thinking she was rather direct for such a youngster. But then that was the kids these days – and good luck to them. They wouldn't obey orders quite so

blindly as their elders did. Besides, her directness made her easy to talk to; to confide in, even. She was probably a student, he reckoned, doing the props job part-time. 'What are you studying, Susan?'

'Me? Oh, you know – quantum theory, mostly. Bit of relativity,

perhaps. Just whatever pops into Grandfather's head, to be honest. And the pre-history of cricket, of course – that's my favourite!'

'Sounds wonderful.' Max had left school at 14, and never really felt he'd missed out on much. Except when lively young girls told him

what they were studying, and he hardly knew what the words meant

'Anyway, apart from me and Maxine, there's what we grandly call a

"guest star" to play all the bit parts, a writer, the producer and an FX

man to make the funny noises – and that's the team. A tight little unit, as we used to say in the war.'

'Well, it's very exciting to meet a famous radio star.'

'You're very kind, mademoiselle. To tell you the truth, *Anyway* is one of those shows that was seen as rather clever when it began, but frankly we've been made somewhat redundant by the new directions in comedy. You know, the Goons, Hancock and so on.' And then, to his own surprise, Max heard himself telling the strange girl what was

really worrying him. ‘The thing is, Susan, our audience is dying.’ He looked her in the eyes, and finally spoke his fears our loud: ‘Literally, dying.’

No matter what he tried, the old ship wouldn’t budge and the Doctor was growing increasingly frustrated, sweaty and impatient. If he lived to be a thousand, he’d never get used to this antiquated excuse for a TARDIS. A junkyard was the best place for it. Assuming he could

persuade it to return there.

Yet this present immobility was more than the craft’s usual

temperamental nature, he felt. ‘Almost as if the TARDIS won’t allow us to leave this place and time.’ He tugged at a tangle of transistors, without noticeable effect. ‘Hmm! As if there is some reason for

keeping us here.’

‘You must talk to my grandfather,’ Susan told Max, taking the

comedian by the hand and hurrying him back towards the green room.

‘He’ll be interested to hear about this.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Oh, he just will,’ she assured him. ‘He’s interested in most things, especially if they’re horrid.’

‘There you are!’ A tall, anxious-looking woman paused with her

hand on the green room door. ‘Honestly, Max, I’ve been hunting for you everywhere.’

‘Maxine, I’m so sorry – I became distracted. This is my new friend, Susan. She’s –’

‘Pleased to meet you, Susan.’ Maxine managed a quick nod and half a smile, but Max could see her heart wasn’t in it. ‘Max, it’s too bad.

You had us all worried.’

He ushered the two women through the door, one arm for each. ‘I’m

sorry, sweetheart, I'll explain all later. Now, come and meet Susan's granddad. He's an old pro, you'll love him.'

Susan knocked on the police box door and the old man opened it a

crack, just enough to reveal his visibly annoyed face. He looked like Punch peering round the curtain.

'Doctor, may I present Maxine, my –'

'What is it, Susan? What is the purpose of these endless

interruptions?'

'Grandfather, Max has something to tell you. There's something

strange going on here.'

'Yes, yes, I know that,' said the Doctor, as he went back into the box and shut the door behind him.

'I don't know who that old actor-laddie is,' said Maxine, 'but he could learn some manners.'

Susan gave that serious consideration for a moment: 'No... no, I

don't think he could, actually. Excuse me a moment, I'd better see what he's up to.' And then she was gone too.

'What are they doing,' Maxine whispered, 'inside a pretend police box?'

Max shrugged 'Painting it?'

She jabbed him with an elbow, which he took to be a good sign.

'Don't be daft! They don't paint the inside of TV props.'

'I don't know what they do on TV,' said Max, 'and nor do I plan to find out. Not until they start paying proper money, anyway.'

'Max, I want you to promise me you weren't... doing anything silly tonight. While we were all over at the pub.'

He put his arms around her. 'I swear I wasn't doing anything. Silly or otherwise.' He didn't mention that the *only* thing that had prevented him was hearing that weird noise. Good God, he'd forgotten about

that: the elephants. What was that? Could it be anything to do with what was going on?

'I worry about you, Max. I think the war affected you more than you realise.'

'The war affected everyone, sweetheart. It was really quite a big do.'

She took his broad wrists in her hands. 'No jokes. Tell me what you think is happening.'

Max freed his left hand and rubbed his knuckles across his forehead.

'I don't know. Probably nothing.'

The studio audiences for most radio shows, *Anyway* included, consisted partly of faithful listeners, who attended every recording.

Max had noticed that lately – ever since they'd moved to the Paris, in fact – each week, some of the regulars he'd become acquainted with over the years were missing.

'When I ask the others about them,' he told Maxine, 'either they

don't know, or else they tell me their friends have passed away quite suddenly.'

Maxine managed a laugh, and Max appreciated the effort it cost her.

'Just proves what everyone's been saying, love. We need a younger audience.' He pretended to laugh with her.

'And as the DHV(R) was telling me at great length this afternoon, to get a younger audience we need a younger act.'

The door opened, and a thin, balding man bustled in. 'If you two

want to hold hands in empty green rooms, you'll have to get married again. I've been looking for you, where have you been?'

'We've been in here, Jolyon, holding hands. It's more of a thrill when you're single.'

'That'll have to wait, I'm afraid. We're going to have to redo the opening duologue. I've booked one of the broom cupboard studios at

EH.'

'Did we fluff it?' asked Maxine.

'You? Never! No, darling, that damned humming noise came

through on the recording again.'

Max shivered, but decided now was not the time to mention that the mysterious BBC hum was something else that gave him the creeps.

'You want us straight away, Jolyon?'

'If you please, children. Oh, one other thing,' said the producer, holding the door for his stars. 'There's another whip-round for flowers, sad to say. One of our regulars has died. Her sister let us know. She was allegedly our "biggest fan". Name of Madge.'

From somewhere in his icy guts, Max found his voice. 'Which one

was Madge?'

'You know her, Max– the one with the feather in her hat.'

'Ha! You're an old fool.' The Doctor patted the main console. 'No, not you – me. I am addressing myself.'

'Why do you say that, Grandfather?' Susan was quite used to

intervening in the Doctor's conversations with inanimate objects.

'I thought the TARDIS was trying to tell me something. I came over all superstitious, Susan, can you believe that? Ha! But it's just that humming noise – primitive air conditioning, no doubt. It's upsetting
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the old girl. It's a rather complicated pattern of frequencies – as soon as I can analyse it properly, I can cancel it out, and we can be on our way.' As he spoke, he took a series of readings from what looked very much like a Victorian pocket watch, hanging from a fob.

'But what about what Max told me? The disappearing audience –

don't you want to investigate that, Grandfather?'

The Doctor sneered. 'I suspect that your friend's understanding of what might constitute a remarkable death rate is unsophisticated. It's

yet another thing these people don't teach in their so-called schools.'

'All right, but now we're here we could at least stay long enough to watch a radio show being made. That might be interesting.'

Her grandfather made it clear that he was not a great admirer of

radio comedy – or of broadcasting in general. He preferred the music hall. 'It's unhealthy for people to sit at home, laughing on their own, instead of as part of a physically present audience. It's not healthy, let me tell you.'

'I've sometimes heard you laughing on your own, Grandfather,'

Susan teased him. 'Though not at comedians, admittedly.'

'What? Nonsense, nonsense,' said the Doctor, looking up from his

readings. 'Oh, come here, child.' She slipped her arm around his waist, and he ruffled her hair. 'We could spare just one day, I suppose.'

She looked up at him. 'And you will listen to what Max has to say?

After all, it's an odd coincidence, the BBC's air conditioning

producing the exact vibrations needed to immobilise the TARDIS.'

A horrified look spread across the Doctor's face. ' *Coincidence*? I've been neglecting your education. Now, where did I put that pack of cards...'

The long, curved corridors in the basements of Broadcasting House smelled, not unpleasantly, of pipe smoke, new carpet, and dust burning on electrical machinery. To Susan, the corridors seemed to go on for ever, and all looked identical. Even at gone nine in the evening, the place was alive with men and women hurrying in all directions, most of them carrying precarious armfuls of papers or reels of tape, many of them nodding to Susan and the Doctor, a few trying to walk straight through them as if they weren't there.

'This building is shaped like a ship,' Susan realised, but her

grandfather wasn't listening. He was marching along with his head down, studying his fob watch.

Suddenly he gave a cry of 'Well, now!' and flung open one of the

endless series of heavy doors that lined the corridor.

‘Get out, you idiot!’ came a yell from within. The Doctor nodded pleasantly, and did as he was told.

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‘Grandfather,’ said Susan, pointing to an illuminated ‘on air’ sign above the door, ‘I think perhaps when that’s lit, we’re not supposed to go in.’

‘Undoubtedly, my dear, quite so.’ The Doctor stroked his chin, never taking his eyes off the instrument in his hand. ‘You notice the humming?’

‘Yes, just like at the Paris.’

‘Not just like, child – no.’ He tapped the fob watch. ‘To the ear, perhaps, but my oscillometer here tells me it’s quite distinct. And that is most interesting.’

‘Susan, Doctor – you found my note. I’m so glad.’ Somehow, Max hadn’t liked to disturb the odd pair in their police box, but nor had he cared to abandon them so abruptly without explanation. ‘But I expected to see you in reception. How on earth did you get past the commissionaires?’

The commissionaires of Broadcasting House – a uniformed corps, composed entirely of former servicemen – were indeed notoriously unyielding, and fiercely protective of BH against unauthorised persons.

Or bloody-minded and officious, as some would put it. And they’d only got worse, Max was convinced, since *The Goon Show* started taking the mickey out of them.

Clearly stifling a giggle, Susan explained: ‘They seemed to think Grandfather was part of the show.’

‘Hmm? Nonsense. Now, young man, I want a word with you.’ While

Jolyon hurried off to edit the tape they'd just recorded, the Doctor took Max by the elbow and set off briskly towards the lift. Susan and

Maxine fell in behind them.

'This business of your dying audience: if I'm to help, you must tell me everything.'

Max coughed. 'No offence, old thing, but what good could you do?'

The Doctor smiled. For the first time in his life, as far as Max knew.

'Oh, I do have some small expertise in matters of the unusual.'

So that's it, thought Max, the Doctor had also been involved in

secret war work. It'd be a relief to talk to someone who really

understood. 'You mean... I may speak freely to you?'

'Of course, dear boy – of course.'

It was a short walk to the George – it'd have to be, Max explained, otherwise the musicians would never make it back to the studio – but when they arrived, Maxine was annoyed to discover that Hancock's

mob had commandeered their table again.

'Never mind,' said Max, heading for the busy bar. 'They'll soon be 32

underneath it.'

Max and Maxine soon tired of pointing out broadcasting celebrities who Susan and her grandfather had clearly never heard of- though Max secretly enjoyed their blank reaction to the name Ted Ray – and, once they were settled with their drinks, he and the Doctor drew to one end of the table, while Susan and Maxine took the other.

'I was a postman back home in South Wales,' Max told the old man,

'but when the war in Spain began, I volunteered to fight with the International Brigades. As a result of which, by the way, I am for ever forbidden entry to the United States. So that's why I'm not a

Hollywood star.'

The Doctor sipped his glass of porter, and said nothing. Another gag

wasted, thought Max, and continued his story.

‘Because I had that experience of guerrilla warfare, when the war started over here I was recruited to an auxunit. We trained under Tom Wintringham. Inspirational man – more or less invented what they

called “the people’s war”. Believed in arming and training the whole population through the Home Guard, men and women, not only to

resist the German invasion, but also to take over the whole country in a socialist revolution if the government and the bankers and the

landowners tried to make peace with Hitler. Did you ever run into Wintringham, Doctor?’

‘Not yet,’ said the Doctor. ‘Do go on, my boy.’

‘Yes, so – I spent the first 18 months of the war living in a cave in the Mendips, waiting for the Nazis. Look.’ He fished about in his jacket pocket, and came out with a set of viciously spiked

knuckledusters. ‘These were special issue. They still fit, you see. I got rid of the cyanide capsule, though. A man can have too many

souvenirs. Never used the spikes in anger – but on the training dummy, they took the poor beggar’s face clean off.’ He took a long pull at his pint of bitter. ‘We were given lists, regularly updated, of “unsound”

locals who would have to be murdered as soon as the invasion took place. We practised sabotage attacks, and learned to speak German –

neither of them skills for which I’ve found much use in civilian life.’

‘And after 18 months, hmm?’

‘Right, well. Once the Soviets had entered the war, and so the

immediate threat of German invasion had receded, I was reassigned to a normal army outfit. It was there, like most comics of my generation, that I learned my trade, doing forces’ entertainments. Took to it; stuck with it; here I am.’ He looked at the knuckledusters for a moment, and then put them away. ‘That and Spain – that was my university. More than ten years on, I think most of what you hear on the wireless is still forces’ comedy, though it presents itself as all modern and civvy street.

It's all shaped by the war, really.'

Realising he was banging on a bit, and in danger of turning maudlin, Max added: 'But you must have done some comedy in your time?' He

still couldn't quite categorise the old man, with his mannered ways and his absurd costume. Mind you, he'd known some of the older turns to insist on wearing their full stage get-up for radio recordings. 'I mean, you're not actually a doctor, are you?'

'Oh, young man, there are all sorts of things I'm not actually,' the Doctor replied, draining his glass.

'I think it's just the guilt that survivors often feel,' Maxine told Susan, in a soft voice. 'All his stuff about "something followed us all home from that war, Maxine." He came home, that's the point, and so many didn't.' She laughed, and tipped an inch of gin and tonic down her throat. 'Plus he's a comedian, so he's a miserable old beggar to begin with.'

'You think it's all in his head, this business of the audience dying off?' 'Well, people do die, don't they?' She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself as well as Susan. 'Especially as the days get shorter. There's influenza, TB, smog and so on.'

'This Madge you mentioned. Did she die of influenza?'

Maxine frowned. 'That is a bit odd, it's true. She was quite young, apparently quite healthy. Max saw her being cuddled by her chap in the street, which doesn't sound like someone who's desperately ill. But apparently her internal organs had undergone some terrible trauma, presumably some awful accident, and yet the police haven't been able to find out where or when or what – let alone how someone so badly injured managed to drag herself home to die in her own bed.'

'I see,' Susan began, but Maxine spoke over her.

'But the important thing is that her death came miles away from the Paris, and days after the recording – so it can't be connected, can it?'

In his office at BH, Jolyon had nearly completed editing the re-

recorded duologue. He still loved the novelty of working with

magnetic tape. If they'd still been reliant on the old acetate discs, Anyway would have been a very different, less inventive show.

He heard someone enter the room, without knocking or speaking.

Probably a cleaner. 'Give me a mo,' he said, his attention on his work.

'Remain calm,' said a voice behind him.

'But tell me about your war, Doctor,' said Max. 'If you're allowed to.'

'My war? Oh, I've never really been able to see the point of war.'

Max understood; the Doctor couldn't, or didn't care to, talk about it.

Most men were the same, he'd found, who'd seen active service.

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'Now, young man – tell me about these current deaths.'

'Probably all in my mind, but... for some reason they remind me of something from my Mendip days. Never knew the details – I don't

think even our local commanders did – but word came down in 1940

that we should be prepared for clusters of German occupiers to die, mysteriously but apparently of natural causes. At the time, we guessed it was a reference to some sort of secret gas weapon. We expressed our unease through official channels – our unit was chiefly composed of rebels and mavericks, we didn't trust the high-ups, and we weren't scared to speak our minds – and, after that, it was never mentioned again.' He lit a cigarette, and thought for a moment. 'Except that there was a rumour that it was all part of something called Operation Shaker.

But you see my dilemma, Doctor? If these deaths now – mysterious but apparently natural, as they are – are due to some sort of germ warfare experiment gone wrong, then what should I do? Tell the police? Tell the press?'

The Doctor's response rather took him aback. 'Tell me about the

humming noise, at your two workplaces.'

'The BBC hum? Well, I don't know what to tell you. BH is

supposed to have the world's most advanced air-conditioning system, so we're told. Or it was when they put it in.'

'Have you always recorded your entertainment at the Paris?'

'No, we used to go out from the Camden.' Max gestured across the

room with his chin. 'Booted out to make way for Hancock and his

clowns. Why do you ask?'

Any answer the Doctor might have given was cut off by the arrival of Jolyon, who slumped into a chair next to Max. He looked awful: red-faced, running with sweat, his breathing loud and irregular. He put a trembling hand on Max's upper arm. 'Was that you, you idiot? You scared the life out of me, you could have killed me – you know I hate stupid practical jokes!'

'Steady on, old thing – I don't know what you're talking about.

What's happened?' Max and Maxine managed to calm their producer

sufficiently for him to manage a few shaky gulps of brandy, and to tell his story.

was about to turn around, to see who it was, when the person

grabbed me from behind and – well, *embraced* me, there's no other way of putting it. After a few seconds he let go, and when I felt up to looking round, there was no one there. It was horrible.'

His colleagues tried to josh him out of his terror. 'Must've been one of the secretaries,' Max suggested. 'Got a crush on you.'

'No, no. It was too strong to be a woman – it must have been a man, a strong man. Like you.'

'Oh, well, whatever you prefer, ducky,' said Max, signalling with his eyebrows for the other half of the double act to take over.

'Perhaps it was the BH ghost,' said Maxine. 'A butler, isn't it, with a twirling moustache?'

'Don't be daft,' said Max. 'Why would a butler be haunting a

modern radio station? No, the BH ghost is a wandering musician, been seen all over the building, eternally searching for a studio he never finds. Which we can all sympathise with, eh, Jolyon?'

But if anything, the producer's state was worsening.

'We'd better get him home,' said Maxine. 'I'll go and find a cab.'

Preoccupied with his stricken friend, Max still heard the girl say: 'He's in shock, Grandfather – do you see how he's trembling?'

The Doctor was fiddling with some sort of fob watch. 'I wouldn't

say trembling, child. I would say oscillating.'

Max turned in time to see a look of sadness cross the old man's face.

The TARDIS was in the green room, and the green room was out of

bounds. Another programme was being recorded – unusually late at

night, due to an earlier power failure – and so the Doctor had little choice but to accept Susan's suggestion that they sit in the auditorium and watch the show.

The scene was still being set as they took their seats. The stage itself was expanded to twice its previous size, by means of extension pieces lugged into position by brown-coated attendants. Then came the

placing of the microphones at various positions; a precise business, apparently, which involved many fine adjustments by the stage

manager, and muttered curses from the attendants.

As the cast took to the stage from the green room, it became clear to Susan that this was a much larger production than Max and Maxine's

'tight little unit'. There were seven performers – most of them taking on several roles each – along with a ten-piece orchestra to perform the theme and incidental music. The whole affair was presided over by a solemn announcer in a dinner jacket, who seemed to be the butt of much of the humour.

Susan was surprised to see how much of the comedy was visual:

some comics delighted in twanging the announcer's braces, or flipping his bow tie, while others worked up the studio audience with funny

faces and silly poses about which, of course, the listeners at home would know nothing.

She loved every minute of it. The endless to-ing and fro-ing around the microphones seemed superbly choreographed, so that no two

comics ever bumped into each other. She was fascinated by the

practised flick with which the artistes turned over the pages of their 36

scripts in such a way that the microphones wouldn't catch any rustle.

The very existence of the special-effects door – standing erect and alone to one side of the stage, with its own dedicated microphone, and an assistant stage manager ready to open, close and slam it on cue –

struck Susan as impossibly funny.

Before long she was joining in with the cheers, boos and raspberry noises that greeted the appearances, and catchphrases, of what were evidently regular characters. She had no idea what 'Only twice? That's not nice!' meant, but she applauded along with everyone else every time she heard it. To her surprised delight, her grandfather laughed louder than anyone, from start to finish.

The recording was ending as Maxine slipped into the seat next to the Doctor. It was clear from her expression that she had something to say, but wasn't quite ready to say it. Instead, she asked them how they'd liked the show. Susan was enthusiastic, but the Doctor gallantly

insisted that it was 'nowhere near as good as your own show'.

Dabbing at her mouth and nose with a crumpled handkerchief,

Maxine told them she and Max found this kind of programme rather

old-fashioned. The Goons have taken surreal situations and silly

catchphrases as far as they can ever go. In future, comedy will abandon larger-than-life characters and be much more down-to-earth. Max and I think that...'

But there she ran out of steam, and her tears flowed. The Doctor

patted her arm, and asked quietly: 'When did he die, your friend?'

She told them that Jolyon had died in the taxi, outside his flat in Belsize Park. ‘He’d had a weak heart for years, and the shock of that stupid episode in BH must have been too much for him.’

‘A weak heart,’ said the Doctor. ‘Mm. Where is Max now? I think

we must act urgently. Fetch him please, and meet us at the TARDIS.’

‘The what?’

‘The police box,’ Susan explained.

When Maxine had gone, the Doctor showed Susan the readings he’d

taken on his oscillometer of Broadcasting House, the Paris during this recording and earlier, when the theatre was empty, and of the dying producer in the George. ‘They are all related, but they are all slightly different.’

‘What does that mean, Grandfather?’

‘We shall find out. When your young friends return, we shall find out.’

By the time Max and Maxine joined them in the green room, the Paris was deserted but for one attendant, impatient to lock up. The Doctor was trying to persuade him to switch off the air conditioning; the 37

attendant was insisting that to commit such an act without proper authority would be tantamount to resigning his job.

‘Look here,’ said Max, ‘We need the place for a late rehearsal, and since you have no specific orders authorising you to stay late, hadn’t you best give me the keys and scoot off?’

‘On your authority, Mr Wheeler? Very well I’ll say goodnight, all.’

Susan whispered to the Doctor that she hadn’t thought the humans

had invented androids, yet. In his other ear, Max whispered that he needn’t worry about the air conditioning.

‘I’ll fix that. They taught us all about switching things off in the auxiliary. Mostly with dynamite, admittedly, but even so...’

‘Now,’ said the Doctor a few minutes later, when the air

conditioning had stopped. ‘What do we notice? Hmm?’

No one said anything as the Doctor studied his oscillator. Then

Maxine got it. ‘If the air conditioning’s off then why can I still hear its noise?’

‘Precisely, my dear. The BBC hum, as you call it, is unconnected

with the air conditioning. It has another source.’

‘Then what is it, Doctor?’

‘I said earlier that I couldn’t see the point of war – but one thing war is very good at is hastening technological advance. Now, listen to me: we are going to perform an episode of your splendid comedy, here and now.’

At the Doctor’s insistence, Max and Maxine set up the stage as it would be for a recording of *Anyway, As I Say*, with everything in its precise position.

‘The FX table should be about a yard to the right,’ Maxine ruled, as she and Max surveyed the results of their labours half an hour later.

‘Well, the Doctor did say we should be precise.’

‘Quite right, young lady,’ Max replied, his impression of her

grandfather so uncannily accurate that Susan had to spend a couple of minutes pretending to blow her nose.

Tea-stained copies of the most recent script were salvaged from the green room, and the strange performance began.

As the comics rattled through their opening duologue, the Doctor

wandered around the auditorium, checking his device, and muttering with dissatisfaction.

Whatever he was up to, Susan could see, it wasn’t working.

Halfway through a sketch about rocket scientists, Maxine had to call the Doctor three times to get his attention. ‘I said: at this point, the script calls for a spot effect.’

Delighted, Susan leapt from her front-row seat. ‘I’ll do those!’

‘All right. You need to pour those marbles from the wicker basket 38

into the tin bucket. Do it quite slowly, and from a height.'

'Oh, I know,' Susan assured her. 'I've seen it done. Only twice?' she added. 'That's not nice!'

'Quickly, child,' her grandfather scolded her.

They continued, with Susan improvising sound effects now and then from the varied items set out on the table, but after 15 minutes the Doctor's disappointment was still obvious.

'Have you got a train to catch, Doctor?' asked Max. 'You keep

checking your pocket watch.'

'Never mind that, why have you stopped?'

'We're a man short. We've reached a scene involving our "special

guest star". He's playing a high mutt judge.'

'Susan!'

'I can't do it, Grandfather. I'm on FX'

It took the Doctor a moment to realise that they were all staring at him expectantly, and that Max was holding out a copy of the script to him. He made a great show of reluctance and annoyance, but Susan

suspected that he rather enjoyed the opportunity to play the old ham.

The show went on, but whatever her grandfather had been expecting, it didn't seem to be happening. At one point, she laughed out loud at one of Max's lines about seaside donkeys and her laughter echoed

around the empty auditorium.

'Of course!' said the Doctor. 'Laughter, the very essence of this place. That's what's missing. Now, what do we do about that, hmm?'

'How lifelike does the laughter need to be?' asked Max.

The Doctor thought about it. 'Well, now. The laughter must be

variable, within parameters – it's the one input where absolute

precision can't possibly be achieved or required. I think any laughter

would do, my boy.'

'Then wait here.' Max nipped off backstage with the attendant's

keys, and swiftly returned wheeling, with some effort, a reel-to-reel tape machine built into a big trolley. He plugged it in, switched it on: and they heard laughter.

'A tape of laughs cut out of recordings, when we're editing for time,'

he explained. 'It's from the good old days, when we had more laughter than we could deal with! We used to lend it to lesser shows.'

They resumed yet again, the laughter track randomly providing

bursts of laughter, at various intervals and of various types and durations. It made for an odd atmosphere, as the invisible audience's reactions only occasionally chimed with what was happening on stage.

'Your line, Max,' prompted Susan during a sketch set in the

Coliseum. There was an awkward pause, as both women realised that Max was having difficulty simultaneously holding back tears and

saying his lines. Maxine dug her elbow into his side. 'Come on,

Sergeant Wheeler. It's not as if this is the first time in our career we've made an audience laugh in all the wrong places.'

'I'm sorry,' said Max, swallowing heavily, and wiping his brow on his sleeve. 'It's just... all of it. The deaths in the audience, and now poor old Jolyon, and the show gradually sinking beneath the waves. An absent audience laughing where there's no laugh lines – it just strikes me as a horribly believable vision of our future. I'm sorry to be so pathetic.'

The audience guffawed, and applauded long and hard.

'Grandfather, this isn't working. It's too random.'

Now it was the Doctor's turn to rush off. When he reappeared, he

was carrying one end of a length of electrical cable, which he attached to the tape recorder. He took more readings on his oscillator, and

made further adjustments.

‘What are you doing?’ Susan asked, tactfully avoiding Max and

Maxine as they shared a cigarette in the second row.

‘This cable connects the laughter tape to the frequency analyser I’ve been using to try to free the TARDIS from the effects of the hum.

Comedy isn’t magic, Susan, you see? It’s merely a matter of rhythm.

The TARDIS, with luck, will analyse the rhythm of the script, compare it to the laughs stored on the tape, and provide bursts of more or less accurate laughter.’ The pocket watch chimed its readiness. ‘Right, ladies and gentleman – from the top, if you please.’

‘From the top,’ echoed Maxine. ‘Get ’er!’

The new laughs were certainly more realistic and appropriate,

although they always came very slightly late. ‘That should do,’ the Doctor muttered to himself. ‘Close enough for comedy.’

‘Grandfather, you are absolutely sure you know what you’re doing?’

The Doctor scoffed. ‘My dear, the last time I was absolutely sure I knew what I was doing was 150 years ago. Most frustrating afternoon of my entire life. Now, you concentrate on what you’re doing, young lady. No fluffs, please!’

Max’s amplified voice cut across them. ‘What the holy hell is that?’

They all looked towards the back of the auditorium, where a humanoid figure – elongated and shimmering – was, as they watched, emerging from within the wall itself.

‘Ah’, said the Doctor. ‘It seems the laughter was indeed the charm.’

The humanoid began an unhurried lope down the aisle towards the

stage. Retreating to the wings, Maxine found two more of the creatures loitering there, and another blocking their exit towards the green room and the rest of the building.

Max stepped forward to put himself between the advancing monster

and the stage. He was a little surprised to find himself doing so, and fleetingly reflected that this was what made a hero: involuntary

reflexes born of training.

Hero or not, the Doctor waved him back to the others, and took his place in the vanguard. ‘I think I might be more useful in this situation, my boy.’

‘Ju-jitsu, Doctor?’ Max asked, and didn’t quite catch the old man’s muttered reply, which sounded something like, ‘Not martial arts – two hearts.’

The vibrating creature was apparently in no hurry, taking its time to weigh the Doctor up before dosing on him. Its comrades merely held their positions.

‘What are these things, Doctor?’ asked Maxine.

‘In their own tongue I imagine they’re called “the people” – I’m

afraid almost every race in the galaxy is. But your wartime government might, I suspect, have called them Shakers.’

Max noticed that the Doctor was still obsessed with his fob watch.

Perhaps he was playing for time – but time for what?

‘Don’t let it grab you, Grandfather,’ said Susan. ‘That’s how it killed Jolyon.’

Her warning seemed to come too late. The Shaker embraced the

Doctor, who cried out in agony. But almost immediately, the Shaker let go, stood back, and gave the old man what struck Max as a very

considering look. ‘Your oscillations are different,’ it said. ‘ *Ihre Oszillationen sind abweichend.* ’

‘Good God,’ said Max, impressed despite himself ‘It’s bilingual.’

‘Well, I’m not prejudiced,’ said Maxine. She let out an hysterical yelp of a giggle. ‘Sorry. Pull myself together.’

‘My oscillations are indeed different, my dear chap,’ said the Doctor, in a friendly tone. ‘And my guess is that you don’t have any orders about killing our kind, do you?’

‘Your kind?’ said Max, but Susan and the Doctor ignored him.

A high-pitched chattering noise bounced around the walls of the

theatre; the Shakers in conference, Max guessed. The result of their discussion was soon announced.

‘You are alien forms, allied with the occupiers. We are alien forms, allied with the natives. Therefore we will kill you. Remain calm while we adjust our frequencies.’ The pattern of the shimmering within and around the Shakers’ bodies altered, as did the humming of the air.

‘Oh, yes, remain calm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Excellent advice, thank you. But what about these two, hmm?’ He indicated Max and Maxine.

‘They’re not aliens – they’re humans.’

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The lead Shaker – the only one with a speaking part, as Max had

come to think of him – looked him over for a moment, and then spoke to him rapidly, in German. It was a simple inquiry about the function of the building they were in, and he replied to it, in German, without thinking. It was only when he heard the Doctor’s groan that he realised what he’d done.

‘They are agents of the occupation. We will kill them when we have killed you. Long live the King.’

‘I’m afraid there’s bad news on that front,’ said Susan. ‘The King is dead.’

‘But the good news,’ the Doctor added, ‘is that the war is over, and your side won.’

‘What are you talking about, Doctor?’ asked Maxine.

The Doctor addressed the lead Shaker. ‘How’s the frequency

adjustment going? Have I time to tell her your story?’ The Shakers remained silent, as their changing patterns continued to flicker, so the Doctor carried on. ‘The Shakers are from another planet – indeed, another dimension, for want of a more easily explainable concept.’

‘Condescending old thing, isn’t he?’ Max muttered.

‘It was the method of death – the embrace, followed some time later by the extreme trauma to internal organs – which made me suspect

extra-dimensional involvement. Everything in the universe oscillates at its own frequency, you see? Yes, yes; the difference in oscillation frequencies between beings from different dimensions sets up a

vibration when they come into contact, which, over a period of time determined by other factors – health, age, body mass and so on –

proves fatal. Clearly the Shakers have developed some form of

shielding which allows them to use it as a means of assassination, rather than of kamikaze attack.’

‘But why are they killing us?’ asked Maxine.

‘Oh, just following orders, nothing personal. Isn’t that right, old chap?’ The Shaker made no reply. The Doctor covertly studied his

pocket watch. ‘When Max told me about Operation Shaker –’

Maxine gasped. ‘These creatures were working for our government!’

‘Yes, my dear. They must have appeared here at Britain’s darkest

hour – not by coincidence, I’ll bet– and offered their services.’

As resistance fighters, Max realised, when every sane person in

Britain believed that occupation by Germany was inevitable and

imminent. ‘The Shakers would have fought a terrorist war against the German occupation, alongside people like me. But – why?’

‘The frequency adjustment is complete,’ the Shaker spokesman

announced. ‘Remain calm.’

‘What was the contract?’ The Doctor’s voice was urgent now. ‘What 42

did the British government promise you in exchange?’

‘A landmass named India is to be ours.’

‘Lebensraum,’ said Max. ‘Nice to know irony was thriving in our

darkest hour.’

‘Death will be rapid if you submit to the embrace; slow if you

struggle.’ The Shaker advanced on the Doctor, its arms outstretched.

The old man called out ‘Max – identify yourself!’

‘What?’

‘Sergeant, identify yourself.’

Of course! ‘I am Sergeant Max Wheeler, of the South Mendip Auxiliary Unit. All Shakers are to place themselves under my

command forthwith.’

Again, the Shakers paused and conferred.

‘Do you have some sort of identification?’ Susan asked Max.

Max called out, ‘Brunete.’ He wasn’t sure his Spanish accent was up to much, but at least he hadn’t forgotten the old Mendip password. The principal Shaker replied, ‘Ouinto,’ and Max replied, ‘Belchite.’

The Shakers’ deliberations increased in pitch and rapidity. Clearly, they were unsure how to proceed. The Doctor was quick to take

advantage of their hesitation. ‘The war is over, your allies won, there was no occupation. There is no need to kill anyone else. Fifteen local years have passed since the contract was made.’

More talk amongst the aliens, but calmer-sounding now. Max began

to relax, just a bit. Maxine took hold of his hand, and Susan smiled at a preening Doctor. And then the speaking Shaker spoke.

‘Then why are we not in India?’

‘Oh, dear,’ said the Doctor. ‘I was afraid you were going to ask that.’

The laughter track let loose a solid roar, for the first time since the Shakers appeared; this was the first time, Max supposed, that it had detected something worth laughing at. The Doctor was again fiddling with that damn watch of his. ‘I very much fear,’ he continued, ‘that the contract was not entered into by the British in good faith. They would never have given you India. And once it was clear there would be no invasion of these islands, I imagine your status in their eyes went from useful last resort to potential threat.’

The Shakers, it appeared, needed no more discussion. ‘The British Empire has betrayed us, therefore we are now at war with the British Empire. We will kill you all. Remain calm.’

‘Yes, remain calm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Whatever you do, don’t panic.

Now, Shakers, you’d better start with me, hmm? I’m the leader here.

Killing the leaders would be the best use of resources, I’m sure you agree.’ He stepped sharply through the effects door, and closed it 43

behind him. All four shakers converged on him, from various

directions. There was no possibility of escape.

And still he fiddled with that antique watch! He seemed to be

adjusting its hands now, and Max wondered if it was a nervous habit or part of his act. As the leading Shaker stepped around the effects door and spread its arms invitingly, the Doctor pressed a button on the tape deck.

The laughter tape began playing backwards, at an odd, stop-and-start tempo, sometimes speeded up and sometimes slowed down. The effect was increasingly disturbing; Max’s ear felt there was a rhythm in there somewhere, and couldn’t help laying to pin it down – but the more his brain struggled to make sense of what it was hearing, the more

uncomfortable it became.

Maxine screamed, and Max’s nose began to bleed. Susan fainted.

The Doctor smiled sadly. And the Shakers collapsed to the ground.

What looked like rips appeared in their bodies.

‘Good Lord,’ said Max. ‘Their sides are splitting.’

The aliens began to fold into themselves, over and over, until there was nothing left. The Doctor switched off the tape.

‘There was an extraordinary concentration of brilliant scientists in Britain at the start of the war,’ the Doctor explained in the green room, over strong tea and, for Max and Maxine, brandy. ‘Many of them

asylum seekers and refugees from Nazi Europe. During the Britain-

Shaker pact, they'd have been working flat out on studying the

Shakers, looking for ways of defeating them. It is one of the eternal truths of history, that today's allies become tomorrow's enemies.'

'Let us toast the dear old Red Army,' said Max, raising his teacup.

'They seem to have found a way of adapting Shaker principles of

oscillation adjustment, to trap the Shaker troops for ever within the fabric of this building – and, I suspect, of Broadcasting House.'

'Why BBC buildings?' Maxine asked.

'I think I can guess,' said Max. 'Things were a lot more factional in 1940 than we like to admit now. Some were determined to fight to the last drop. Others proposed fighting for a while, then negotiating a peace deal. Not a few were in favour of teaming up with the Nazis against Russia. I imagine that the faction of the government that was dealing with the Shakers had allies inside the BBC.'

'So what released them?'

'The specific vibrations of your show,' said the Doctor. 'The shape of this theatre, the layout of the auditorium, the precise placing of the microphones, all set up an oscillation which allowed the Shakers, one by one, to emerge from their prison. In a crowded recording session, all 44

eyes on the stage, they weren't spotted; they slipped away to do their duty.'

'To kill members of the audience?' said Susan.

'They most have been in a kind of suspended state all these years.

Emerging, somewhat disorientated, and finding themselves in a theatre full of laughing people, in what they thought was an occupied country, they logically assumed that these happy, confident people were either occupiers or collaborators. You see? And they were opportunistic in selecting their victims – those they could catch alone and kill in secret.

They couldn't do much. I'm sure most of them died during their

captivity, so they were undermanned. But they did their awful best; they kept their bargain.' Max could see the Doctor was unhappy at

having had to destroy the creatures. Still, he had to ask...

'How, dear boy? Not difficult, no, not difficult at all. Slaughter rarely is. It took me a while to fully analyse their oscillations, but once I'd done so I was able to produce vibration frequencies that made it impossible for them to exist in this dimension.'

With seconds to spare, thought Max, though it would perhaps be

rude to mention the narrowness of their escape. 'Isn't it a somewhat bizarre coincidence that the precise vibrations of *Anyway* should release the Shakers?'

The Doctor sniffed. 'There are no coincidences,' he said.

'You mean because everything happens for a reason?'

'I most certainly do not! I mean because nothing happens for a

reason. What humans call coincidence is just their own awareness of a pattern. Only arrogance or ignorance could think that your petty

patterns are of concern to the universe! Still, neither quality is one in which you people seem to be in especially short supply.'

While the humans were still blinking at the insult – and at its

implications – the Doctor took a pack of cards from his pocket,

shuffled it, and dealt it out in perfect order, ace to king, hearts to spades. 'Now, what is the probability of that?'

'The odds?' said Max. 'I happen to know that one: 635,053,559,600

to one.'

'Correct. Now watch this.' He dealt again, and Max felt let down

when the cards this time come out in an apparently random

arrangement.

'So, what are the "odds" against that? Hmm?'

'Oh, I get it!' said Maxine. 'Exactly the same as before.'

'Precisely, my dear. Every hand of cards ever dealt has odds of

635,003,559,600 to one against being dealt – and yet still they are dealt! Patterns, you see; they're only there if you look for them.

Otherwise... well, it's just a meaningless hum in the background, isn't
45

it?'

Once Maxine and Max had finally gone home, and with nothing now

to prevent the ship operating, the Doctor wasted no time in heading back to the TARDIS.

Where to now, Grandfather?' asked Susan as they entered the

control room. 'I suppose it could be anywhere, couldn't it?'

The Doctor began to operate levers on the ship's console. 'Quite, my dear. I'm afraid so. I'm sorry – I know you were enjoying our time in Totter's Lane.'

'You never know, Grandfather,' said Susan. 'Perhaps we'll find

ourselves back in 1963.'

'Don't be ridiculous, child. The chances of that happening are far more than 635,013,559,600 to one!'

As the familiar noise of dematerialisation began, Susan felt a little wistful. She'd liked the comedians, they were fun, and she wished she could have known them longer. It would be marvellous to have some younger shipmates to accompany them in their travels.

But, of course, that was an absurd daydream. Grandfather would

never in a thousand years agree to carrying passengers in the TARDIS.

46

'What do you mean, wait? I'm not the sort of person who's used to waiting!'

Emily had never seen the Doctor's face go so red. The MOD aide backed away nervously.

'Nevertheless, sir. Until someone is available to see you and your friends, I'm going to have to ask you to wait here.'

Emily put her hand on the Doctor's arm, trying to calm him down. As the clerk left the ante-room, the Time Lord huffed and sighed but eventually was able to sit down next to Will.

'And I don't know what you're smirking at, young man!'

Will laughed. 'Nothing, Doctor.'

Emily sat down too, and the three waited in silence.

Then, Emily said, 'Doctor, what do you think happened?'

'I don't know, Emily. That's why we're here.'

'But you must have some idea. The number of mysteries you've been involved in over the years. They must have taught you something.'

The Doctor smiled at her, now totally relaxed.

'It's not as simple as that. And, anyway, what about you? You've been with UNIT, what, a few years now? I would have thought that you'd know not to expect anything other than the unexpected.'

'But are we talking a big conspiracy?' Emily continued. All those files being destroyed became they detailed some great scandal that the British military wants swept under the carpet? Or do you think we're going to find a cleaner who's thrown the wrong set of papers into the bin?'

'Who knows?' The Doctor beamed. 'That's what so exciting, isn't it? That's why, when I suggested this little trip, you didn't take too much convincing.'

'Maybe it'll be monsters from outer space,' said Will, taking out a cigarette from his jacket pocket. He then seemed to think better of it, and placed it back in its pack. What?' he said, ranching Emily's teasing look. 'I just thought it might be "no smoking" in here.'

'In 1957?' Emily laughed. She was really taking to Will – she knew they'd be good friends.

'Anyway...' Will turned to the Doctor. 'Colonel Chaudhry's right. You must have some idea what we're looking for. My money's on something paranormal

– it'll be ghosts or something.'

'Lieutenant,' sighed the Doctor. 'Why would ghosts delete records of wartime activity 12 years after the event? And, at any rate, we should keep

an open mind. Quite often, events that appear to be magical or even from "beyond the grave" have a completely different explanation.'

47

One Card for the Curious

Xanna Eve Chown

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Ace

As he works, the old man mutters under his breath and as he speaks he draws his words.

Sister Moon, I give you a crow-black sky to sit in. Below you, a winding road leads the eye through towers and turrets. On this path a howling moon-dog with beaten eyes and a lunar wolf sit and stare.

Between them, the click-clack claws of a lobster scrape the sky, dredged from a pool at the beginning of time...

The pencil scrubs at the paper, his hand moving quickly across the page. For a second he pauses, poised over the fat, blank circle of the moon. His eyes flick momentarily upwards then he sighs and starts to add a face. With deft pencil lines he describes dark eyes, a small nose and sullen mouth. He finishes by shading in a long fringe swept over to the side. From his chair he reaches over and peels a piece of sticky tape from the dirty window with a fingernail. He uses it to stick his picture to the glass, the face of the moon gazing out through the glass. He waits.

The Doctor closed his eyes and took in a deep breath of air through his nose. Puffing it out again through his mouth, he wriggled his toes in the sand.

'Smell the air, Ace,' he said. 'Seaweed, tar and fish and chips.

There's nothing quite like it.' He was holding his shoes by the laces and swung them up and over his shoulder. Behind him on the shingle Ace was sitting on her jacket, clasping her hands around her knees.

'I know,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'But the smell of seaweed

doesn't really do it for me, Professor.' Then she added, brightening slightly, 'Fish and chips, though! Can we?'

'We can,' said the Doctor.

‘I’ll go and take a look, then.’ Ace scrambled to he1 feet and picked up her jacket. ‘There’s probably loads of shops up on the road.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Report back.’

Ace ran over the stony beach and onto the pavement. Across the road, a line of amusement arcades vied for people’s attention with loud music, lurid carpets and flashing lights. She crossed over and stood by the entrance to the biggest arcade, watching people feed money into the slots.

Near the door, one machine was pushing piles of pennies forwards

and backwards. With each push forwards the coins teetered on the edge of a shelf. Surely just one more penny would make them all tumble over the edge and down the metal chute? A girl with a long fringe was methodically feeding coppers into the machine. One after another, they flew down a ramp and skidded onto the polished surface. Each coin increased the pile moving hypnotically but nothing fell over the edge or came clattering out of the machine.

Ace itched to have a go. She fingered the five-pound note in her

pocket and looked around for a money-changing booth. There was one in the far corner of the arcade. She could play a couple of games and still have enough money fo1 fish and chips.

As soon as she got up close, however, she realised her mistake.

There was no counter or employee to change her money. Instead, there was a closed door and a grimy window. Written on the glass, in half-scratched away gold lettering, she read the words ‘Hiram White –

Tarot, Clairvoyant &c’. A piece of paper was stuck to the inside of the glass. Looking closer, she could make out a smudgy drawing of two dogs and a gigantic shellfish. Above them, the girl’s face on the moon looked strangely familiar. Ace wrinkled up her nose.

‘Freaky,’ she muttered. A slight movement from inside the booth

made Ace jump.

A boat moves away from the land, carrying its cargo out into the unknown. The water on the left of the boat is calm, the water on the right stormy. Huddled on board, a passenger hopes to leave behind difficulties and sorrow. Does she see the six sharp swords that surround her? We cannot see her face...

‘Sorry,’ said Ace. ‘I didn’t mean to disturb you.’ She moved away from the door, bumping a girl standing behind her.

‘Mind where you’re going,’ she said. It was the girl who had been playing the coppers machine. She stepped past Ace and knocked on the door of the booth. The person inside coughed.

‘Enter.’

The girl shrugged and went inside, shutting the door firmly behind her. Ace looked at the picture taped to the inside of the window again.

The moon stared back at her. Its face was the face of the girl who had just walked in. Ace walked slowly back to the entrance of the arcade and looked out over the sea. The sun was starting to sink down to the horizon on her right, but overhead the moon was already out, shining palely. Ace shivered and put her jacket on. The Doctor would be

wondering where the fish and chips were, she thought. Or, more likely, wondering what sort of trouble she had got into. She smiled to herself.

Well, she wasn’t getting in trouble. She wasn’t doing anything really. It was probably her imagination working overtime, but she kind of

wanted to make sure the girl came out of the booth okay. Then she'd go and get some food.

Ace beard an angry shout and turned to see that the girl from the booth behind her. She was brushing frantically at her top with her hands and shouting at a man standing next to her. He was flapping at her apologetically with a rolled-up newspaper and holding an empty paper cup. The girl's dress was covered in a huge coffee stain. The girl flounced away towards the entrance and Ace caught her arm.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'I'm soaked,' said the girl. 'Fine, though. The coffee wasn't too hot.'

'What did he say to you, the man in the booth?'

'To be careful of people carrying hot drinks,' said the girl. Ace looked surprised. 'No, really. That's really what he said.' The girl gave a small smile. 'I only went in cos there was a picture in the window that looked a bit like me. But, hey.' She shrugged. 'I guess he really can see the future.' She walked away down the road, pulling at her wet clothes.

At last I see that I conjure you, conjuror. I have waited a long time for a magician like you. How shall I draw you; the link between heaven and earth? There's a lemniscate above your head and a table of tricks before you... dagger, pentacle, chalice and stick... Yours is a power that I can use. You are close by. You will cure my ills, take me from this place and help me live again...

Ace took a deep breath and walked back towards the tarot booth. So much for staying out of trouble, she thought. As she approached, she saw a thin, white hand pull down the picture from the window and

stick a new one in its place. I'm not going in, she decided. I don't want to hear some old mumbo-jumbo from a creepy man in an amusement

arcade. I've only got enough money for the fish and chips anyway. It was probably just a coincidence that the girl looked so much like the face in the moon. But even the word coincidence made Ace feel

uneasy. Coincidence was a concept she was beginning to rule out since

she had been travelling with the Doctor.

Ace looked at the smudged drawing in the window. It showed a man standing at a table with one hand raised to the sky. He was wearing long, flowing robes and had a sideways figure of eight floating above him. On top of his head was a Panama hat. She looked closer and saw a familiar creased face with twinkling eyes and broad smile. She frowned.

'Doctor?' she muttered. The door to the booth creaked slowly open.

Page of Cups: Princess of the Waters and Lotus of the Palace of Floods.

A traveller with an unformed mind, yet full of courage when courage is needed. You come to my door again, yet you remain un-summoned. Why do you bother me?

'Sorry to barge in,' said Ace, poking her head around the door. 'I just wanted to, er... know something about the future?' She stepped inside the booth. It was dark and cramped and smelled of unwashed hair and clothes. A circular table, covered in blue tiles, took up most of the space.

Yellowing newspaper clippings were pinned to the walls, and there were three dusty shelves, stuffed with old books and magazines. On the floor were piles of papers, heaps of pencil sharpenings and a few empty tins.

Ace sat down on the empty stool nearest the door and looked at the man silting opposite her.

'Princess of the Waters,' he rasped. 'I will give you a single card for your curiosity.'

'What did you call me?' asked Ace.

The man was thin, with long, white hair. He was wearing dark glasses and a dirty black jumper. A large golden earring in the shape of a triangle dangled from one ear. He pulled at it with his long fingers. He picked up the pack of Tarot cards from the table and spread them, face-down on the tiles like a stage magician.

'Pick a card, any card?' asked Ace. The man nodded slightly. Ace's hand hovered over the cards, then she pointed to one in the middle of the pack.

‘As good as any,’ she said, determined to keep the mood light, if only on her side of the table. Hiram White turned over the card she had picked. Both he and Ace leaned forward to look at it. It showed a man standing in front of the sea. He was juggling two large gold coins in his hands.

‘Yeah?’ said Ace encouragingly.

‘Watch out, or one of his balls will drop on you,’ said the man.

Ace stood up. ‘Are you trying to be funny?’

‘One card for the curious,’ said the man with a shrug. He picked up the 51

card and returned it to the pack.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ said Ace, getting up to go. The man was clearly mad, she thought with something close to relief. Not a threat, just plain spooky. She left the arcade and went back to the beach to find the Doctor. He wasn’t where she had left him – of course he wasn’t – but she could see him leaning on his umbrella at the edge of a group of people further along the beach. They were all watching a street entertainer on a unicycle, pedalling forwards and backwards on the spot. As she got closer, she could see that he was juggling four yellow balls. Ace edged through the crowd towards the Doctor, but when she got near the front, she trod on the man’s cap. It was half-full of coins from the audience and her foot skidded slightly. She righted herself in time, but she had distracted the performer. One yellow ball slipped out of his hand and bounced off Ace’s head.

‘Hey!’ she said.

‘You okay?’ asked the man on the unicycle, still juggling the other three balls. Ace nodded and the man gestured with his head for her to throw back the ball. She picked it up off the ground and tossed it up to him. He caught it smoothly and threw it straight into the air without losing his rhythm. The crowd cheered and the Doctor slapped Ace on the back.

‘Well done, Ace,’ he said. ‘All part of the show, eh?’

‘It *hurt*,’ she said, rubbing her head. ‘But I think it was... Doctor, do you believe in fate?’

‘Fate?’ The Doctor looked at her quizzically. ‘I believe that people tend

to make their own fate. Have you been reading the horoscopes in the chip paper?'

'What?'

'Come to think of it, where is our supper?'

'I'm not that hungry any more. Professor, I want to show you

something.' Ace pulled the Doctor away from the crowd and back along the shingle. 'I found this man, in an amusement arcade. He's a... well, I think he's a psychic.'

The Doctor arched one eyebrow.

'Well, I mean, I think he knew that we were coming. Or that you were anyway.'

'But, Ace, *we* only knew we were coming here a couple of hours before we arrived.'

'I know that, but... Well, come and look.'

Ace steered the Doctor across the road, describing what had happened to her in the booth, but stopped short when she heard the wail of ambulance siren. The ambulance dashed past them and pulled up outside the arcade. A young man was lying on the pavement, surrounded by a 52

staring crowd. Someone was offering him a glass of water and someone else was shouting up at a man on a horse. Ace could just make out the words *shouldn't be allowed.*

'What happened?' Ace asked.

'That bleeding horse nearly killed him,' said a bald man in a denim jacket. 'He came out of that booth in the corner and that horse came out of nowhere.' He pursed his lips. 'Looks like he's had a lucky escape.'

Ace tugged at the Doctor's sleeve and they ducked into the arcade. No one was playing the machines. Everyone had gone outside to watch the ambulance take away the unfortunate man. Even the booth was empty.

The door was slightly ajar. Are pointed vigorously at the picture stuck in the window, then peered through the door. She could make out the

Tarot cards spread across the tiled table. They were all face-down except one.

Ace gingerly picked it up. A knight on horseback, sword raised, was charging across the card.

Outside the booth, the Doctor was examining the picture in the window.

Are showed him the card and he nodded.

‘D’you know what this is, Ace?’ he asked, pointing at the drawing.

‘It’s you,’ she said. The Doctor squinted at it again.

‘It’s the Magician from the Rider-Waite Tarot. Not at all a bad copy.

Although I don’t seem to recall the man in the original card wearing any kind of headgear.’

‘Well, he is now,’ hissed Ace. ‘He’s wearing *you* r hat.’

‘I don’t seem to recall Miss Coleman-Smith modelling that particular card on me when she painted the cards. Let me see.’ The Doctor

drummed his fingers on his chin. ‘The Magician. The first card of the Major Arcana and the last trump on the Hermetic teaching path of the Kabbala. Corresponding to the Hebrew letter Beth or the rune Ansuz.’

Ace rolled her eyes. ‘What does it mean?’ she asked.

‘In a Tarot reading, the Magician can indicate an abundance of

creative initiative, skill and potential,’ said the Doctor. ‘This card tells the questioner that they have a great reserve of power and energy available to them – but *how* to use it is their decision. If the card is ill-dignified, it can be a warning against trickery.’

‘Ill-dignified?’

‘Upside down, Ace.’

‘Oh. So something’s up, then?’

‘Yes, Ace. Something’s definitely up. Three perfect predictions in less than an hour is more than a coincidence, and Tarot readings are never that specific. They’re all ‘prepare to accept change’ or ‘you’ve been

through some hard times.' I mean, what are the chances of making such specific predictions come true? Unless...'

53

'Unless?'

'But that's it! The reader is *making* the predictions come true. He's not guessing the future. He's forcing it to happen.'

Ace frowned. 'Come off it Doctor. That's even less likely than him being a proper mind reader.'

'Is it, Ace?' The Doctor sighed. 'Let's take a look inside this booth, then, shall we?' He pulled open the door and Ace squeezed in behind him. The Doctor spun round to look at the cards on the table and

accidentally kicked something leaning against the wall. There was a clatter and a pile of tins rolled onto the floor. The Doctor picked up a tin and stared at it in surprise. ' *Holloway's Pills*,' he read out. ' *One of the best alternative medicines for purifying the blood and assisting Nature in all operations.* ' He set the empty tin down on the table and picked up another one. ' *Holloway's Amazing Pills*,' he read. Then he caught sight of another. And another...

'What are they, Professor?' asked Ace, looking at the box. 'Assisting nature in all operations? That's just a clever way of not really saying anything at all. What do they do?'

'Not much,' admitted the Doctor. 'But they made Thomas Holloway a Victorian millionaire. You only have to read the tins to see how clever he was with words. Look at this.' He picked up a yellowing piece of paper.

' *These famous pills give tone, energy and vigour to the great main springs of life. To the Emigrant, Traveller, Soldier and Sailor they will be found invaluable in the time of need in every clime in all stages of life.*

No wonder people went mad for them! These pills were still being

produced in the twos.'

'So, what's in them?'

The Doctor sniffed at one of the tins. 'Aloe, myrrh... a pinch of saffron,' he said. 'Certainly nothing that would actually harm you.'

‘So what’s this man doing with all these empty tins?’ said Ace. The Doctor looked round the dirty floo1 of the booth.

‘One or two tins, and I would say that he was a collector of antiques,’

he said. ‘All these and I would say he’s an addict.’

There was a noise from outside the door, and Ace recognised the

whispered muttering voice of Hiram White. She also recognised the unpleasant unwashed smell.

The Hermit stands on the cliff top with his shining lantern betokening inner light and wisdom. To draw this card suggests a meeting with one who will guide the Seeker towards his goals. One who has the courage and maturity to do what is right...

* * *

54

‘Hello, I’m the Doctor and I believe you’ve met my friend?’ The

Doctor raised his hat in greeting. ‘You must be Hiram.’

The old man stood framed in the doorway. With one hand he

mirrored the Doctor’s gesture and touched his head. Then he gestured wordlessly at the table.

‘Ah, sorry, yes we’re in your, er... booth,’ said the Doctor, edging out of the door and into the arcade, quickly followed by Ace. ‘No room for three, eh? Not much room for one either. Do you live in here?’

Hiram gestured for the Doctor to sit at the table.

‘Well, thank you, but no reading for me,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’ve gained rather a reputation for being a bit too... accurate in your predictions. I rather fear if you do my reading I might come a bit of a cropper. I’m happier without a kick in the backside from a horse, if you see what I mean.’

The old man laughed. It rattled in the back of his throat and he

coughed, reaching out mechanically with one hand for one of the tins of pills. He stopped, put his hand up to his mouth and wiped away a fleck of spittle. ‘Empty,’ he said, painfully. ‘Every tin is empty now.’

‘I’m sorry, how long did you say you’d been living here?’ asked the Doctor. The man pointed silently to a torn calendar on the wall.

‘June 1891,’ read Ace. ‘But that’s impossible. I don’t understand.

You’ve been living here making predictions for over a hundred years?’

‘For the last few years,’ rattled Hiram. ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked the Doctor.

Ill-dignified, the Queen of Swords is the dark essence of air behaving as water, like a cold rain. Born with the gift of natural intuition, she has uncanny powers of perception and insight. Easily seeing the weakness in any argument, she can savage friend and foe alike, her pride covering a hollow sense of isolation and dissatisfaction with lift...

‘Well, that narrows it down,’ said Ace.

‘It’s all right, Ace,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m thinking. You’re saying you’re from a race of psychics.... Ain I right?’ The old man nodded slowly. ‘Not from Earth. But from somewhere quite near this solar system, I expect?’ The man nodded again.

‘Can’t you just tell us?’ asked Ace impatiently. ‘If you want us to help you, you might as well be a bit more helpful yourself.’

‘Hush, Ace. He likes the game.’ The Doctor’s frown deepened, then he smiled. ‘Cramand! You’re from Cramand. Host planet to the

Eleven-year Psychic Games.’ He looked at Ace. ‘They’re held every eleven years, you know. Quite a thing to watch.’ The man winced

slightly and looked away.

‘Well, come on, then,’ demanded Ace. ‘Are you?’

‘I’m from Candram,’ said the man. Ace’s expression remained

unenlightened. ‘Cramand’s moon,’ he muttered.

‘Oh, I do apologise,’ said the Doctor. ‘I bet everyone gets those two muddled up. Still... Candram, eh? You made a psychic jump, I suppose.

Phew!' He whistled appreciatively. 'That's a long way to come. An impressively long way.' The man stared back at the Doctor with red-rimmed eyes. 'Now, Hiram. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm beginning to get a little tired of the sound of my own voice. D'you think you could, you know, fill me in a bit? A little bit of back-story maybe?

Let's start with... why haven't you jumped back home yet?'

A man stands in shadow before seven burning chalices. Each one offers a heart's desire that could make a beating heart burst with the joy of their fulfilment. A laurel wreath mounted in the cup decorated with the skull, or jewels, divinity, discovery. Intoxicated, the man hesitates before the choice. He cannot move, he wants to taste it all...

'Intoxicated,' said the Doctor. 'The pills?' The old man stared back at him.

'I don't know why you sound so surprised; you said he was

addicted,' muttered Ace. She just wanted to get away from the booth and the man. Customers were beginning to filter back into the arcade, now that the ambulance had left, and some were beginning to stare. 'I thought you said they were okay, anyway?'

'I meant for humans,' said the Doctor. 'Who knows what effect

Holloway's pills could have on an alien constitution. I bet Holloway would have loved to add that into his advertising. "Also of benefit to extraterrestrial life forms."'

'Or not, in this case,' Ace pointed out Hiram White was in a pitiful state. Somewhere amongst the general repulsion she felt a bit sorry for him. 'Look, what can we do to help you?' she asked. And please, she thought, don't let it have to involve actually touching you. The old man sniffed.

A powerful figure sits in a swift chariot, pulled by sphinxes. This triumphal car moves from one plane to the next. The Chariot knows its path and its destination and will get there, no matter what stands in its way. Seven planets wander against the fixed stars. Mastering those planets means mastering the system. To draw this card represents the possibility of travelling through the mysteries of the universe...

'You mean the TARDIS?' said the Doctor. 'Well, you're right. I do have the power to take you back home if you're too weak to make the

jump. You have predicted correctly, as it were. Though what your

friends will make of you in this state, I don't know.'

'I'm sure there's someone there who'll make you right as rain,' said Ace, glancing at the Doctor. What was he doing? Trying to convince the old duffer not to go home? The sooner Hiram was gone the better as far as she was concerned. He could spend his life playing pathetic practical jokes with juggling balls on a planet far, far away.

Hiram gave an awful, rattling laugh. He scrabbled around by his feet, picked up a metal money box and clicked it open with a bony finger. It was stuffed full with new pounds, old pounds, shillings and pence. He slid it across the table towards the Doctor. 'All for you,' he said, running his tongue greedily across his lips. 'Every petty parlour trick I have turned over the last few years. As soon as I knew you were

coming, I started making money for you. There's money you can spend now and money you can spend a hundred years ago. Useful... for a

time traveller.'

The Doctor pulled himself up straight and banged his umbrella on

the carpet.

'I didn't say anything about travelling in time,' he said sternly.

'That's not part of the deal. I don't want any money. I'm offering to take you home so you can get some help. I'm not taking you back to start again. You've messed things up yourself.'

'You misunderstand me,' said Hiram, sulkily. 'I don't want to go

home. And I don't want to start again.'

'Then what do you want?'

'Some pills.'

The Doctor levelled his eyes at the ruined body of the old man.

'They're killing you,' he said sadly. Hiram glared at him in rage.

The Chariot ill-dignified displays an ineffective use of force. Might turned against the weak or the righteous and a senseless advance without

consideration of the consequences for others...

'It creeps me out when you do that,' said Ace angrily. She turned away and walked over to the nearest jackpot machine.

This is my fault, she thought, staring at the flashing lights. I could have gone straight to buy the fish and chips; I didn't have to come in here. The lights on the machine pulsed on and off quickly. Ace looked down at the slot and saw a shiny 20p piece in the tray beneath it. Give him the pills or leave him without them? Both thoughts made her feel guilty and mean. Was there a third option? Her hand hovered over the coin in the tray. They could take him home against his will. Would the Doctor do that. A cold shiver ran down her spine as she realised she

didn't know. Ace looked over her shoulder at the booth. The Doctor was still talking to the old man inside, his shape blocking the small doorway.

Ace picked up the coin and fed it into the slot. The music cranked up a notch and all the squares at the top of the machine started dancing crazily.

The three reels started to spin fist, the bells, cherries, bars and coins blurring until she couldn't make out the shapes any more. She stared furiously at the spinning wheels, her hand poised over the buttons below the reels. I'm not going to cry, she thought.

The Doctor put a hand on her shoulder, making her jump. He was

alone, Ace noticed with relief. She glanced at his pocket, trying to work out if he had taken the money. The Doctor followed her eyes.

'I told you before, Ace,' he said. 'People choose their own fate.'

One by one, the three reels slowed down and stopped.

Séance, or Smoking is Highly

Addictive, Don't Start

John Davies

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Ace

Locals are still recovering from yet another hit-and-run accident. At 7.45

pm yesterday, a young boy, who has yet to be named, was struck by a car and left for dead.

***Manchester Evening News**, Wednesday 31 March 1982*

Locals are still recovering from yet another hit-and-run accident. In the early hours of this morning, a young man, who has yet to be named, was struck by a car and left for dead. If it hadn't been for the emergency phone call made by a nearby doctor, it is uncertain how long this accident would have remained undetected.

The doctor gave a good description of the car, details of which can be found on our website. Unfortunately, he didn't take note of the registration number.

Listening to the call, it is clear that this doctor is not local. When asked for further information, he says something about choices and that at this time he had bigger ones to hand. The call ends with one word.

Karma.

***Granada Reports**, Saturday 31 March 2007*

March 2007

He didn't want to be here. Not again. Revisiting the night that had, effectively, closed his heart and sealed his fate had never been on the agenda.

More used to raising a glass than resting a finger on one, Tim felt the damp sheen of nervous sweat coating his fingertip.

He had said no.

Yet, he was here.

Fighting back the instinct to simply call it a night and go home, he stayed. He couldn't go. He was the designated driver. With the stillness 59

of the room almost deafening, he remembered the first time he had heard of tonight. It had been three weeks ago at work on a cigarette break. A small group was in the smoking room discussing the impending changes in the smoking law. A number had commented how difficult they would find it not being able to smoke in public

places. Someone from data input had suggested setting up an internal help group, but Sylvia from accounts immediately piped up and announced that the social committee had

already started work on one.

Tim had almost choked on his cigarette as he saw Patrick roll his eyes behind her. Sylvia had a reputation for promoting the social committee whenever and wherever she could. In fact, the standard joke in the office was that she could turn any conversation around to the group within two sentences. Subject normal, was the phrase people used. Always under their breath, of course. Or via email.

Tim's mind had started to drift along with the cigarette smoke as quiz nights merged with the latest book club offering. Yeah, like he was really that desperate to spend an extra hour or so in work that he'd come in early to discuss Bridget Jones's latest, trivial dilemma. Taking a drag, he had been more concerned with trying to work out if that guy on reception really did use hair paint to cover his receding hairline...

'What do you think, Tim?' Steve's voice had snapped him back to the then and there.

'S-sorry,' he bad mumbled. 'I missed that. What?'

Steve was grinning, his cheeks flushing in the way they always did when he was unduly excited. Or when the food machine stockist walked past his desk.

'They're doing a vigil!'

'That's a bit intellectual for the book club, isn't it? No offence, Sylvia,' he'd added, seeing that her trademark stare had taken root.

'No, not Virgil. A vigil.'

'A vigil? What, to Graceland or something?'

Steve had shaken his head vehemently, 'No, a *vigil* vigil. They're doing a haunted-location stay-over.'

'A lot of people asked for it,' Sylvia interceded, unbidden. 'It was the most popular request following the desk drop.'

Tim had shuddered. 'Oh, no. No way. Count me out.'

Steve, of course, hadn't counted him out. He'd begged, he'd pleaded, he'd sulked, he'd worn Tim down. Now, here he was in the pitch-black upper room of a supposedly haunted public house alongside Steve, a numbe1 of people from work he'd never seen before and a medium who had, apparently, brought a spirit into view on some cable channel.

When he'd first seen the medium, he'd wanted to laugh. The guy was 60

so groomed, so stereotypical: long coat, slicked-back hair, the air of

'otherworldliness' so apparently rehearsed. And then he thought back, remembered, and caught the medium's gaze. He blanched. Right there and right then, Tim would have much rather been in a side room at work discussing big knickers.

Or a *Mr Man* book.

Anything but this.

The medium had got them all to link hands and invoked protection

around the whole group. Despite himself, Tim genuinely imagined a ball of white light encasing him and passed it onto his left. Was it just him, or did he actually feel some warmth pass from his right at the moment he did that?

When the medium asked them all to 1eopen their eyes, he did.

Please, he thought to himself; *don't say it. No one say it. Say anything but that phrase.*

The medium's voice, calm, self assured and warm, broke through the verbal silence.

'Is there anybody there?'

Tim bit down on his lower lip. Too late.

In the light afforded by a lone, flickering candle, Tim tried to make out the faces of the group. Details eluded him, but most faces were staring in earnest fascination. Despite his reservations about being there, Tim had to admit there was a genuine sense of anticipation in the air.

'We do not come here to mock you. We come in the spirit of peace,

harmony and love. Please, if there are any spirit people here in this room, and I know there are, please show yourself. Give us a sign. Touch one of us. Knock something. Move something. Talk to us.'

It wasn't that Tim disbelieved in the afterlife; he just felt it was something best left alone.

Ever since...

March 1982

'Tim. Are you okay?'

Tim looked up from the paper. 'He's dead, mum. Andrew's dead.'

His mum sat beside him, holding him. The paper fell to the floor. To avoid looking at the picture again, Tim buried his face in her warm embrace and cried.

'It's my fault, mum. It's all my fault.'

As he cried, his mum stroked his hair, reassuring him that it was a tragic accident. No one was to blame.

However, Tim knew she was wrong.

Andrew hadn't wanted to go. He'd double-dared him into it.

Two days before, after school, a group of them had set up a makeshift ouija board in a friend's garden shed. They had lied to their parents about where they were. They had sat there, not really knowing what they were doing.

'Is there anybody there?' one of them had asked. Under their fingers the upturned glass had jerkedly moved over to the piece of card with

'YES' written in felt pen. A few gasps had been heard, together with a number of nervous giggles.

'What do you want?' Tim had asked, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

The glass had bumped to 'U'.

Tim frowned, adjusting his position on the floor without letting go of

the glass.

‘What do you mean, “U”? “U” what?’

Nervously, they had watched as the glass slid to ‘D’, then ‘I’ and ‘E’.

That had been too much for Andrew. Scared, he had snatched the glass up and hurled it at the shed wall where it smashed into fragments. Some claimed it had been real; others laughed it off; stating they had seen people pushing the glass.

However, all Tim knew as his mother cradled him was that Andrew

was dead. Killed by a hit-and-run driver while riding his bicycle. And it was his fault.

A sudden jolt made Tins look up at his mother. She was frowning.

‘Tim,’ she said. ‘Have you been smoking?’

March 2007

Tim sighed. Here he was again, back where he had always promised

himself he would never be and desperate for a cigarette. All because Steve wanted to go and needed a lift back home. That stupid ‘buddy’

scheme! A slight tugging sensation on his outstretched finger mused Tim to glance down at the table. No handwritten pieces of cardboard, no scabby knees and no conkers. This was the real deal... and the fingers on the glass were so much older. Under them, the glass was moving.

A collective intake of breath accompanied the glass as it edged toward the copperplate ‘YES’ on the board’s surface. Tim heard Steve mutter a quiet, ‘Oh, my...’ He himself took an involuntary gulp of air.

The medium smiled, nodding. ‘The spirits are with us,’ he announced.

Nervously, Tim moved his feet under the table, hooking them behind the legs on his chair.

The medium once again assured the alleged spirits that the group

meant them no harm and that they were there in the spirit of truth and love. Although the glass didn’t move across the table at this point,

was sure he felt it tremble slightly upon those words being spoken.

The one they'd used as children had not done that.

Leaning forward, Tim found himself wondering if that time had been a prank. Had Andrew's death been a horrible, coincidence? Had

everything changed, or rather stopped, because of a hoax? This felt more intense, more active, and more electric. Or was that simply the moment and the atmosphere?

'Are you male?'

The glass moved, this time in a small circle, coming to rest on 'YES'.

'Did you die here?'

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, very slowly, the glass slid across to the 'NO' portion of the board.

'Have you a message for anyone in the room?'

Goosebumps erupted on Tim's forearms as the glass glided back to the

'YES'. His mouth became dry. Was this Andrew? Was he trying to come through to say goodbye?

'What was your name in life?'

Patiently, Tim watched as the glass started to move again. Almost willing it to go to 'A, he frowned as it completely encircled 'N'.

Shocked at the disappointment that washed over him, Tim watched as the glass traversed the board, touching letter after letter. He ran them through his mind.

'Neil Hilton?' he exclaimed, his voice louder than he had expected.

'Who on earth is Neil Hilton?'

Someone to the left of Steve coughed. Tim glanced toward the sound, his eyes now so accustomed to the low lighting he could see the face of the man who had coughed. He was terrified.

'Err, that's me,' the man said, and Tim felt his blood run cold. Before he could wonder why, a low growl broke the moment, and Tim

instinctively looked at the medium. He appeared concerned. The candle flame was littering, caught in the current of a breeze that was swelling from within the room. This mused deep shadows to cross his face,

distorting it.

Slowly, Tim released his finger from the glass and retracted his feet from the legs of his chair, placing them firmly flat on the floor.

'What is that?' Tim asked, his voice brittle.

The medium was shaking now, all previous composure gone. 'I don't know,' he said. 'My spirit guide had been shrouded from me. In all my years in the profession, this has never happened before!'

The growl dipped, but then continued... now louder, and growing in volume. Tim felt the fabric of his shirt ripple and cold air brush against his skin.

As he watched, panic started to erode the resolve of the people in the 63

room. Neil Hilton let out a strangled scream and wrenched the glass from the table. Tim immediately saw the shed again and Andrew drawing his arm back, aiming the glass at the badly creosoted panels.

Absentmindedly pushing non-existent glasses back up his nose, Tim lunged at Neil, the word, 'No!' filling his mind even though his physical voice failed him. His momentum ceased, though, as the breeze became a strong wind. The noise rose as well, almost as though they were part of the same phenomenon.

In the darkened room, a shadowy black mass was appearing in one

comer. It writhed and pulsed. The people around the table rose, some trembling in fear.

Questions for which Tim knew there were no answers were uttered.

Glancing at the medium, he saw the man was actually crying.

The mass deepened in shade. Even in the confusion and lack of real vision it was clearly evident.

And then silence fell, only the sound of the medium's sobbing audible.

The mass, however, was still there.

A flush of adrenalin forced Tim into action. Remembering where the light switch was, he crossed over to it and flicked it down. Harsh, artificial lighting bathed the room, causing many to blink.

Tim squinted, and looked over to where the mass had appeared. What had been just a dark shape in the blackness now had solidity and identity.

As his mind started to take in the lettering on it, a soft click sounded and a door within the shape opened inward.

'Ah, hello,' a new voice said, cheerily, as a man emerged, doffing a panama hat. 'Not too late, am I?'

Unable to sleep, Tim slipped into his dressing gown and wandered into his front room. Lighting a cigarette, he switched his computer on.

Inhaling deeply, he waited for the system to boot up. The screen soon displayed the familiar wallpaper of his school photograph. As always, Andrew caught his eye. Tim flicked his cigarette, a large amount having burnt away as he sat staring at the image.

Sighing, he poured a glass of whisky and settled it next to the

keyboard. Starting the internet, he logged onto his blog page. He brushed aside the mental wince he felt at seeing the age jump from school photo to profile picture. He looked at the list of entries. It was there. Selecting the thread, he scrolled to the point where the man had appeared and settled down to read the next part.

That's How I Met The Doctor

...The mass had been a TARDIS. Although it looks like one of those police boxes you sometimes see in the background of old black and 64

white movies, it is, in fact, a time and space machine. Seriously.

Strange, isn't it? There we all were in that room above the pub trying to find out if there was an afterlife and that very night I saw proof that there is other life, alien life.

The Doctor is an alien. Two hearts. You can't get much more alien than that Well, actually, you can – believe me, I know, I've seen it, seen it all, or rather a great deal, but I'm just trying to make you

understand.

Oops, that sounded really patronising, didn't it? I didn't mean it to, it's just that to an ant a leaf is huge, to a leaf, a tree is... if you get my drift?

If it hadn't been for that cigarette break, my life would never have taken the turn it did. Strange, really. I hadn't even wanted a cig at the time, but what with the sudden system failure I took the opportunity to grab a quick breather. That's when Sylvia told us all about the haunted investigation. Looking back, I could be mistaken – and don't forget I've been away for years in my terms – but I'm pretty sure that the system failure rectified itself quite soon after she told us about that event I never, ever thought I'd be thankful for anything that came out of Sylvia's mouth. To this day, I have no idea why she had been with us in the smoking room – she didn't even smoke. Maybe she just saw a

potential audience for her social group.

Subject normal, eh?

Anyway, the Doctor.

When he stepped out of the TARDIS and asked if he was too late,

well, none of us really understood what he meant. When he then

proceeded to walk right over to me, say my name, introduce himself and say what a pleasure it was to meet me, I was totally gobsmacked.

'Don't worry,' a confident, female voice said next to me. 'He does this kind of thing.'

I looked to my left and saw an attractive, if tomboyish, teenage girl in a black bomber jacket 'He's confused me for years. I'm Ace, by the way.'

'At what?' I asked, and the Doctor laughed.

'That's my name, ghostbuster.'

The Doctor left me with Ace, asking if I'd mind waiting for him. He knelt by the medium and spoke to him until the man stopped crying.

Although I was still trying to work out what he had meant, I was

spellbound by the way his words, although silent to us, were soothing

and calming the spiritual head of the group. Ace looked on as though this was an everyday occurrence. A further exchange later, the Doctor and the medium addressed the room. Within minutes, they eased everyone's

concerns, assured them nothing had happened... and that no strange blue box had appeared out of nowhere and no one had emerged from it.

Everyone had been here all along. It was an old building, creaky, 65

exposed to sudden nocturnal winds... and the landlord collected strange items of English memorabilia. That was all.

Seemingly satisfied, the gathering dispersed. I could tell that not everyone had bought the story they had been fed – even Ace sniffed –

but enough had to make any mention of it from the others seem like the ramblings of an unhinged mind. They wouldn't be discussing this around the water cooler come Monday.

The medium lingered. Questions tumbled from him, falling over

themselves. Was his gift genuine? Were the voices in his head really from the other side? Was he helping or deluding people in doing what he did? Was his life full of meaning, or was it nothing?

While Ace quickly knelt by him, holding his hand reassuringly, the Doctor merely quoted Hamlet at him, saying there were more things in Heaven and Earth, before letting him leave.

As the door closed behind the medium, Ace rose and the Doctor turned back to me. Rubbing a forefinger on Ace's nose, he winked. Thanking me for waiting, he said, rather than asked, 'You didn't want to come here tonight, did you?'

I shuddered. How did he know that? Shaking off the unease, I saw him smile – a genuine, slightly crooked smile.

'He knows you didn't,' Ace murmured.

'Exactly! I'll explain how I know later. Care to join us?'

I gestured toward the blue box. 'What? In there?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It's cosier than it looks.'

I started to panic, as I recall – and the Doctor seemingly sensed it. As he began to assure me he wasn't there to harm me, my unease faded.

Ace's less than subtle prod in the ribs stirred me into moving.

Taking one last look around the room, I walked toward the opening in the blue box, the TARDIS, and suddenly agreed with Hamlet in an way I never had during my A-levels.

The TARDIS, you see, is vast on the inside. The Doctor did try to explain it all to me one day – transcendental dimensions and some such stuff. Suffice it to say, all you need to know is that it's bigger on the inside. Much, much bigger. Or, as Ace put it, 'Huge!'

The Doctor quickly showed me to a room, one which Ace was quick

to point out was near her in case I ever needed to discuss things without

'him listening in'.

One night, I took her up on the invitation. Why me? Why had they

come for me? Ace motioned for me to sit on her bed, advising that I should be careful of anything metallic. When I asked why, she said, matter of factly, because it might explode. By this time in my travels, I didn't question this any further.

'Have you ever had an uncle that, although they scare you, you

somehow trust without even thinking about it?'

I nodded.

Ace smiled. 'That's the Doctor.' She settled next to me. 'I've seen stuff. I know you have too, but I've seen stuff that I never wanted to. I don't mean the planets, the aliens, the corridors. He's taken me back on myself, forced me to face what I didn't want – and not on my own terms.

But, ultimately, for the better. He's doing the same with you. He's exorcising you.'

'Doing what?'

‘Softening you up. Showing you the wonder before what the wonder

can really expose you to...’ She had paused, gently rubbing her forefinger on my nose. ‘You.’

I’d left then, not really sure what she meant.

However, as always, she had been right. Ace was always right. Since then, the Doctor has shown me my death. But he was there. The scary, yet trusted uncle.

I was killed, like Andrew, on the roadside. I’ve been there. I’ve seen it.

I saw myself die, the Doctor kneeling beside me at the time, standing in the TARDIS doorway behind me in the present.

So, you see, the choice is now mine. The Doctor will, eventually, take me back to that point in time when the system went down at work –

when he made it go down. He has to. I’m an anomaly. I will have the knowledge of all this, a knowledge that every human has always wanted

– how they will die. I will have the awareness that if I go outside and have that cigarette, I will hear of the vigil and despite any misgivings go and meet the Doctor. I will have many strange and wonderful adventures, as I am doing now. However, I will always know that every time the TARDIS lands it may be my last trip. I could be shot by alien beings, kidnapped and tortured by power-crazed dictators, in effect I could, potentially die in many, horrible, lingering ways. Alternatively, this could go on and on... Do I age in the TARDIS? Could I escape death and live for ever? Would I actually want to? Something tells me I don’t.

Surely we are born with a life span for a reason. There must be a limit to what the human body, and more importantly, mind, can be subject to.

Or, with the knowledge I have, I could not go for that break. I could, instead, choose to go out with a group of other friends and end up on that 1oadside like Andrew, the victim of a hit-and-run driver so many years ago... lying there, telling the man who I thought was a paramedic that I had another engagement for that night, one I maybe should have gone to despite my unease at dabbling with paranormal things.

All I know is, I will have that choice. The Doctor will give me that.

Maybe he already has. Perhaps I've already chosen and am unaware of it.

Certain or uncertain death. Or simply prolonging the inevitable.

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Whichever way, I will die, eventually, the choice is now mine.

Anyway, we've landed, I'd better sign off for now...

Neil

Tim cursed as his computer screen froze. Pressing refresh, he lit up another cigarette and waited for the screen to update. When it did, the entry he had been reading was gone.

There was no point looking in his cookies. It neve1 lodged there. It was as though someone hacked into his PC and manually deleted it.

He clicked out of the internet, the box disappearing.

A box that appeared then disappeared...

Certain or uncertain death...

Through a cloud of curling smoke, Tim saw the school photograph

again. There, just behind Andrew, a pair of young, blue-grey eyes stared directly at him. One of the others who had been at that séance as a child, one he had not consciously thought about for years.

Neil Hilton. The name spelled out on the ouija board that night in the pub, a name that, to him, had been lost in the mists of time. They had been so close, before he shutdown. They had been so similar, so

connected, and yet they splintered soon after Andrew's death. Tim had found it impossible to allow anyone to share his life, even on the level of friendship, after that Family became distant and work colleagues never progressed to being more than that He had stopped living and started existing.

Neil and Tim; two separate lives, so different and yet, despite

everything else, still seemingly linked. After years the same job, same

outlook on the occult, and, it seemed... same choices. Coincidence, or had Neil tracked him down, waiting for a chance to reach him and break through the wall he had built around himself? Was he still trying now?

Having been given options in life, was Neil trying to make him realise he still had choices to make? Certainly, Neil was somehow able to log onto his blog page and post messages. Messages that always made him

question himself. Messages detailing that night in the pub.

N.E.I.L.H.I.L.T.O.N. Those letters on the ouija board. That must have been this Doctor character checking to see which option Neil had taken, ensuring he was there before landing that blue box. The TARDIS.

Perhaps the blog messages appeared every time Neil had to make that decision? Was he asking for a second opinion? Whatever the case, they certainly appeared when he was smoking heavily.

Looking back, Tim had hoped for Andrew to come through, for proof of life after death. Instead, he'd been thrown riddles about life itself.

Startled, he realised he was rubbing the bridge of his nose.

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Tim flicked the butt of his cigarette, breaking his train of thought. He looked at the back of his cigarette packet. Smoking is highly addictive, don't start. He laughed. Why was that always on the back of the packet?

It wasn't as if you'd buy a packet, look at the message and think, 'Oh, I never realised... Can I have my money back?' However, perhaps starting wasn't the issue. Perhaps it, like this Doctor, was the choice provider.

From the day we are born, we will die. That is the only certainty in life.

Bar taxes and broken hearts. However, we never know how. By

smoking, are we, subconsciously, taking hold of that, creating a certain end despite always protesting that it may not be the ultimate cause? I know how I am going to die. Fine. Sorted. Now, where's the life in between? Is smoking a subconscious attempt to take hold of the

ultimate uncertainty and claim it? However, what if he had never started? What if after that original séance he had not asked someone to buy him ten cigarettes from the shop where the day before his only concern was if they had any Spicy Tomato Snaps?

More importantly, what if he gave up now?

He would still die, but he wouldn't know how. It may still be cancer, it may be a road accident, it may be an infected paper cut... but the journey would be less prescribed, more organic. More natural.

Tim reached a decision. When someone dies, you don't have to die

along with them. He stubbed out his cigarette. A cluster of red embers glowed briefly amidst the grey. Tossing the half-smoked packet into his waste bin, be looked at Neil's static image. Prolong it, mate. Live your life for as long as you can. live it for Andrew.

As I will. Starting now.

Ace peered inside the TARDIS console room. The Doctor was busy at the controls, typing away on one of the many keypads. What was he planning this time. Where was he guiding them to? Past, present or future?

She shrugged. Wherever it was, she'd cope with it.

The Doctor stopped typing and looked toward her, waving her in. He'd seen her. How did he do that?

'Ah, Ace. The internet. Such a great invention. This was only just taking off when we met. By Neil's time, it was everywhere. People, the world over, talking about everything and nothing from the comfort of their own rooms – sometimes their own workstations. This is my own variation.'

Ace scowled. 'Seems a bit nerdy to me, Professor.'

The Doctor smiled. 'So says the badge collector. However,' he added,

'it does need careful policing. Some people post things they really shouldn't. Let's see. Deleted from the universal drop down and the 69

galactic cache. For now. Excellent.'

Ace bounded across to see what the Doctor was deleting. She managed to see the word 'blog' before the Doctor minimised the screen.

Knowing it was pointless to press the Doctor on this, Ace asked, ‘He’ll be okay, won’t he, Doctor?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Who?’

‘Neil.’

The Doctor grinned, realisation having dawned. ‘Ah, yes, Neil. You remember him. Good. He’ll be fine. He’s made his choice.’

‘I just hope it was the right one.’

‘If all consequences are taken into account, every choice is the right one, Ace. You should know that by now. Talking of which…’

The Doctor maximised the screen again. In an area marked ‘search’ he typed Neil’s name and the phrase ‘school friends’. A list scrolled up and the Doctor ran a finger down the screen, pausing on one in particular.

Hitting a key, the name Tim Leicester was highlighted and then details filled the screen.

As she read it, Ace blinked in amazement. Tim’s time of death was blurring. Once the blur faded, the date was different, years later than what it had been.

‘Another pet project, Professor?’

‘Yes, but not mine. Neil’s. Bless. He thought I didn’t know. However, it seems he succeeded.’

‘Travel with the Doctor and a little piece of him rubs off on you, eh?’

‘I am something of a karma catalyst, it has to be said. Two lives have been jumpstarted. And they say I should have remained on Gallifrey.’

A thought occurred to Ace. ‘So, hang on, this internet, or your version of it, shows when people will die?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘Am I on there?’

‘Everyone is, Ace. The question is, would you want to know?’

Ace stared at the screen, transfixed. If she knew that, she’d know that

until that point she would have succeeded in so many things. However, it would also confirm that, ultimately, she failed in the long run, and failure wasn't a word she liked.

'No, Doctor,' she said, copying him and minimising the screen. 'I'm not ready for that.'

The Doctor lightly touched the bridge of her nose. 'No. Not even Time Lords are. So, where to, Ace?'

After a moment's hesitation, Ace said, 'Life. Anywhere there is life.'

'That's quite an open field.'

Ace smiled. 'Exactly.'

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The Celestial Harmony

Engine

Ian Briggs

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

It was a sound that had brought him here. A chime echoing through the vast interiors of the TARDIS. The machine had materialised in the cosmopolitan African bustle of Seville sometime around the early or mid-seventeenth century– he hadn't paid too much attention to the exact date. It wasn't the date that troubled him. It was that sound.

The air was filled with the hubbub of daily chores as the Doctor

made his way through the winding Calle Sierpes. He knew the street of times past, but many of the newer buildings were unfamiliar to him. An aged woman was returning slowly from the old church of San Pedro, so he introduced himself as a traveller recently returned from the Americas and asked after the home of the 'famous engineer'. His guess hit the mark, and she raised a silent finger in the direction of an impressive casa set back from the street.

The old stables had been cleared, and the space occupied by a

magnificent engine of polished brass and oak. A ruddy-faced engineer sat hunched over a workbench, cleaning a powdery crust of red clay off newly cast brass gear wheels. The Doctor gazed at the engine, and

admired the intricate gearings.

‘This is even greater than your San Cristóbal theodolitus, Señor

Carlos.’ The engineer paused in his cleaning but didn’t look up. ‘And what would a stranger know of naval equipment?’

‘They say the San Cristóbal would be 20 fathoms deep, along with

all her crew, if it weren’t for the craftsmanship of Señor Carlos López.

Your superb theodolitus guided the ship past the treacherous Peniche rocks.’

Señor Carlos turned to the Doctor with modesty. ‘They said that,

true enough. But... who am I to welcome as a guest?’

The Doctor smiled warmly. ‘You wouldn’t know me, but most

people just call me Doctor. I’ve heard the reports of your naval

engineering – but this, this engine surprises me. I was expecting a new theodolitus or a maritime astrolabe. But this is some kind of harmonia caelestis.’

The engineer’s face flickered with surprise. ‘And who exactly is this stranger, this “Doctor”, who speaks of such great instruments?’

The Doctor’s face softened. ‘You’ll find me a friend, Carlos, in a time when enemies gather.’

Carlos broke out with laughter. ‘You’re talking melodrama, Doctor.

I’m building a wondrous new engine – it is indeed a Celestial Harmony Engine. Great good will come of it; lives will be saved. Already it can predict the winds. Listen.’

He reached up to a water pipe and turned a small tap. The weight of flowing water set an upright wheel in movement causing a

mechanism of spindles and gears to spin faster and faster in ever-increasing procession, until – as the smallest, innermost flywheels became a blur – the Doctor heard the chimes again. No, not ‘heard’. He knew the chimes, he knew them in his soul. A song running

through him. The song of soft, gentle air caressing frangipani bushes in the courtyard outside. He smiled at the peaceful melody.

Then he frowned. ‘Sub-chronic resonance. This is wrong, very

wrong.’ Carlos laughed in renewed delight. ‘I know, I know. The

second transmission wheel is too large. I’m just about to replace it.’ He indicated the clay-encrusted gear wheels on the work bench.

But the Doctor was still troubled. ‘What celestial interval are you using?’

‘Moon-rise to moon-set – as I did last time, but I’ve taken new

timings. Last full moon there was slight morning cloud, but two days ago had a clear sky. I’ve also improved the movement of my

metronome.’

‘Carlos, I must warn you, there’s great danger in your work.’

You don’t understand, Doctor. It’s perfectly natural – movements in the stars and correspondences here on Earth. The Engine calculates celestial movements and matches the correspondences with earthly

events.’

‘In short, it predicts the future.’

‘Exactly! It sings the song of the future. Already it can tell us of winds; but imagine when it can tell us more– rains, droughts. An end to crop failures, an end to starvation and ruin. The Celestial Harmony Engine will be our salvation, our blessing from the Almighty. And tonight the lunar apogee after sunset will provide an ideal ratio to calibrate these new gears.’

‘Yes, a huge leap forward. But how on earth did a respected

navigational engineer come to create such an unearthly masterpiece?’

Carlos hung up his file. ‘Conversation for later, Doctor. Right now it’s the time for something to eat. Let’s see what arrangements we can make for an extra place at our table.’

‘Doctor, allow me the honour of introducing my wife, Doña Isabel de Andújar.’

The Doctor leaned to kiss the delicate, outstretched hand. ‘My

pleasure, Doña Isabel.’

The woman’s warm brown eyes sparkled as she laughed. ‘You see,

Carlos, I am besieged with gallants.’

Carlos stiffened. ‘Indeed, my dear.’ He gestured towards the

shadows. ‘Doctor, may I also present Don Ramiro de Hierro y Lerma?’

A sinuous figure dressed in austere tones uncoiled from the

darkness, and bowed just a little too deeply towards Isabel. ‘I’m humbled to devote my services to Doña Isabel.’ He then turned and inclined respectfully to the Doctor. ‘Don Ramiro de Lerma y Hierro), Doctor,’ he corrected subtly. ‘Any servant of Doña Isabel will find me a steadfast ally.’

The Doctor bowed with due respect but no further, and spoke

formally. ‘You bring as news of events in the royal household.’ Don Ramiro’s eyes flickered in surprise, so the Doctor nodded towards a small insignia on Don Ramiro’s shoulder. ‘You’re wearing the insignia of the Count-Duke de Olivares.’

Don Ramiro accepted the Doctor’s observation as a compliment.

‘The Count-Duke has indeed done me the great honour of accepting

my services. Have you also received an interview in Madrid?’

‘I’ve been away for some time. The Count-Duke must be very

interested in Señor Carlos’s wonderful engine. It’s just the thing to restore Spanish fortunes and bring the Dutch bankers crawling on their knees.’

‘When the great engine is complete, I’m sure the Count-Duke will

wish to reward Señor Carlos for his work.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I see. So your services are somewhat

speculative in nature. You haven't actually discussed the matter with the Count-Duke.'

'No, not as such. But he is a great patron of the arts and sciences, and will surely welcome Señor Carlos to the Colegio Imperial.'

'In return for a modest introduction the, no doubt.'

Don Ramiro's gaze darkened. 'Great works need their patrons. Señor Carlos could not have built his great engine without the rents from Doña Isabel's late father. The Count-Duke's resources can build a thousand of these engines.'

'Indeed, I've heard that the Count-Duke's plumage is almost as fine as the exotic birds he keeps.'

The lady's voice rose in protest at this new conversation. 'Please, gentlemen, I forbid you to discuss politics on such a fine day.'

The Doctor and Don Ramiro both nodded graciously in acceptance,

but their mutual dislike continued to bristle in the air.

The sun began its arc towards afternoon, and shone through the

workshop doorway. It cast dark shadows into the engine's deep interior spinning its song of the hot hours ahead. As a traveller through the winds of time, the Doctor was sensitive to subtle cadences in the song which Carlos couldn't know. The Doctor examined the spinning

wheels, and recognised many of their proportions from the interior ratios of the TARDIS – fundamental proportions of time. There was something majestic about these intervals which normally filled him with awe – the splendour of cosmic truth. But here, now, in mid-seventeenth-century Seville, the Doctor felt sick in the pit of his soul.

Carlos was innocent of the Doctor's thoughts. 'What do you see,

Doctor?'

The Doctor shook his head, unable to mouth a lie. 'I see... a work of absolute beauty.'

Carlos smiled.

The Doctor sensed the flow of time gently caress a row of fine brass vanes, delicate as gossamer in the innermost heart of the engine, as they sang in warm polyphony. ‘Your engineering is exquisite, Carlos.

The great machinery of the Heavens crafted by human hand. It must have taken years.’

‘A lifetime, Doctor. I first saw one of these forty years ago.’

The Doctor awoke from brief reverie. ‘You’ve seen one of these

machines elsewhere?’

‘Not this size – a much smaller one. When I was a ship’s lad,

carrying trade from port to port. We had a stranger travelling with us once. A tall man with strong features. Some of the crew said he was a Berber who had magical powers. Any rate, he could tell us when the winds would be strong and which sails to use. Even the ship’s captain was fearful – but that seemed to suit the stranger; he didn’t like to spend time with the crewmen.’

The Doctor maintained a scientific air. ‘You say this stranger was using an engine like this to predict the winds?’

‘He kept it secret, but I spied on him one day. I saw him take a small engine from a chest and listen to its song. But then he caught me prying.’ Carlos laughed. ‘I thought he’d beat me, but when he saw it was only an inquisitive boy, he was kind and let me use his engine, as

long as I promised not to tell anyone how his magic worked. That’s when I first discovered my enthusiasm for navigational instruments.’

‘And forty years later, you still remembered the design for this

amazing engine and started to build it.’

‘I dreamed of it every day.’

‘Carlos, you were not meant to build this. The stranger who showed it to you was not a Berber. He came from the away, a place you can’t even imagine – even further than the stars in the sky. If he’d suspected a young lad could remember the ratios and build a copy, he would

never have shown you the engine.’

Carlos looked quickly away.

The Doctor sensed something awry. ‘I’m missing something, aren’t

I?’

‘Doctor, I’ve tried to live a good life and be a good man. I always try to do my best, I really do. But sometimes I fall short…’

‘What happened?’

‘Please don’t ask me to reveal failures which must remain my

private shame. The afternoon is drawing on, and I must fit the new gears before moon-rise. Enjoy the afternoon while I finish my work.’

Isabel was arranging frangipani blooms in a crystal vase on her

dressing table as Don Ramiro waited attentively. She laughed gaily. ‘I never imagined that one day I would have a *chichisveo* waiting on me, especially at my age!’

‘To tell you the truth, Doña Isabel, I can’t imagine a more pleasant way to pass the afternoon.’

‘You could be helping Carlos finish his engine. That is, after all, what brought you here.’

‘But now that I’m here, I find an even more noble cause: a beautiful and delightful woman to serve. Every moment I’m with you, I brim

with joy. All I ask is to remain here in your company and enjoy the warmth of your laughter.’

‘That seems a reasonable request, which I can hardly refuse.’

‘May I be candid, Doña Isabel? The truth is, I know I’ll never win you – that would be foolish. I’m low-born, and I accept that – it’s what I am. But… to be accepted by you for what I am – one day perhaps to be trusted by you – that would be more than I could hope for ‘

‘If you earn my trust, Don Ramiro, then it’s my duty to give it.’

‘Then I must be bold, even though I may lose your trust for ever.

I’ve sometimes watched you through the window, and I’ve seen you

with a small ornament. And when you hold it in your hands, you sigh so sadly.' Isabel turned her face away from Don Ramiro.

'I'm sorry, Doña Isabel. I've spoken too boldly. I'll leave you and 75

not disturb you any further.'

'No...'

Hesitantly Isabel opened a small casket on the dressing table and withdrew an ornament: a slender lozenge in smooth white china the length of her hand and decorated with delicate floral images and

strange markings. She held it out to Don Ramiro.

He turned it delicately. 'It's exquisite. An oriental toy in finest bone china – a woman's plaything. May I ask where it came from?'

'It was a wedding gift to me from Carlos.' There were tears in her eyes. 'I'm sorry. It must be unbearable for you.'

'I loved him very much.'

Don Ramiro nodded. 'It's pain beyond bearing when someone you

loved turns against you.'

Isabel looked at him quickly. 'No, it's not that. You misunderstand.

I... I say the wrong things. I don't understand his machine. He gets frustrated. I deserve what he does to me. So...' She winced slightly. 'So I arrange the frangipani.'

The Doctor could feel the shirt sticking to his back in the heat as he watched Isabel cross the patio and disappear towards the workshop. A delicate diapason of sound eddied through the late afternoon, but the Doctor shook it from his mind. The sun was sinking in the hot sky as he considered his options. He estimated it would set in a few hours'

time, and moon-rise would follow soon after. His options were getting fewer with every degree the sun fell.

In fact there was really only one option left

Isabel stood in the workshop. 'Why don't you love me any more,

Carlos?'

‘I do love you. Why do you ask such a ridiculous question?’

‘I don’t feel loved. You’re in here all the time; I’m in the house. I only see you at meal times – if then.’

‘But this engine is for you. It’s your project. Your father’s rents are supporting us.’

She ran her hand over the polished oak and listened as the engine sang of hot, still air hanging in the humid afternoon. ‘I thought it might bring us closer. But it only drives us further apart. You spend even more time in here. It’s become you1 obsession – I don’t exist.’

‘I’d gladly share it with you, but you’re not interested in gears and arcs, or casting bronze and planing wood.’

‘What happened to the gifts you used to give me?’

‘I’ll give you this. Tonight my life’s work will be complete and I’ll give it to you as my greatest gift.’

‘And then will we be together again?’

‘We will, my love.’

A voice broke the moment and rasped from the lengthening shadows

inside the doorway. ‘I could wish for nothing better, Señor Carlos. But the afternoon draws on and we must be ready for moon-rise tonight.’

The figure of Don Ramiro slid into the sunlight, new shadows forming around him. ‘Perhaps it would be best if Doña Isabel were to

accompany me on a short walk, while we still have the sun. If you would permit me, Señor Carlos?’

The engineer glared at the libertine. ‘You seem to do very much as you please.’

‘I make the most of your generous hospitality, Señor Carlos.’

‘A skill which has carried you far in life,’ breezed the Doctor as he strode in.

Don Ramiro’s eyes darted quickly as he uncoiled and then lazily

recoiled again. ‘I can’t make up my mind about you, Doctor. We know nothing about you, after all.’

‘You’re so right, Don Ramiro. I could be an agent of the Dutch bankers, I could be sent by Queen Isabella, I could be the Devil himself. But what about you? What do we know about you – apart from your close personal relationship with the Hen-Breeder-in-Chief?’

Don Ramiro noticed the Doctor’s distraction. ‘Does the machine trouble you? Sometimes the sounds remind me of that castrato Baldassare Ferri.’

The Doctor picked up on this small piece of information. ‘So you’ve travelled to Italy.’

Don Ramiro shrugged. ‘I was in Rome. He’s got the strongest voice I’ve ever heard. Churches packed wherever he sings. But the strange thing is, when I looked round the congregation, it was only the women’s faces in rapture. The men were just listening uncomfortably. The voice was so perfect – too perfect, in fact – unnatural.’

‘It’s a barbaric practice, mutilating young boys to preserve their voices.’

The libertine sneered at the Doctor. ‘You’re such a moralist. You’ll make a staunch friend to the Great Inquisition.’

The Doctor’s eyes flashed angrily.

But the libertine moved quickly to consolidate his advantage. ‘The Engine must be protected. Even from you, Doctor. In fact especially from you.’

The Doctor glared at him darkly. ‘Would you look into the future, Don Ramiro? Would you know the fate of nations? Would you pry into God’s prerogative? Are you so presumptuous?’

‘And would you have us live in blindness, Doctor? What gives you

the right to decide who shall see?'

'Looking into sunlight will blind you, Don Ramiro.'

The heat of the day blistered down as Don Ramiro walked with Doña Isabel in the courtyard. 'The afternoon has turned oppressive, Doña Isabel. Perhaps you would prefer the shade?'

'Why do you dislike each other so much? You've never met, have

you?' 'Not that I recall. But I know his type. There are malcontents even within the Royal Court. Servants who secretly support the Dutch or Portuguese and would rather see the Crown bankrupted again.'

'Are these things really so important?'

The libertine made a quick calculation of the moment's opportunity and then lowered his voice. 'There's something I must tell you, Doña Isabel. Inside, where we can be away from prying eyes.'

He guided her indoors. 'Your chamber would be the most discreet. I think.'

'Don Ramiro...'

'Trust me. I serve you in this above all.'

He closed her door behind them. 'You said earlier that you deserve what you receive at the hand of your husband.'

'Please, I...'

The libertine continued urgently. 'I've seen how you sit at meals –

not leaning against the left side of your back.' He reached forward and pressed her back.

She gasped with pain.

He released the pressure but left his hand touching her. 'May I see?'

She turned quickly away in shame.

'I'm sorry, it's wrong of me to ask. Perhaps instead I should share my own secrets with you.' He unloosed the cords of his tunic. 'If you'll forgive me.' The tunic fell away, and the shirt slid down over one shoulder, collecting perspiration as it fell. He turned so she could see

his back.

The mark was jagged and vicious brown. The cruel lines made the

shape of an elongated Hon his back. The woman looked at it in shock.

The sun slid below the horizon with an angry red glow, illuminating the engine with dark bronzed shadows. Back in the old stables, the Doctor struggled to focus on the situation, but the melody tugged at his thoughts. This was an adversary unknown to the Doctor. How could he fight a simple engine? How could he fight against anything when his mind was drawn inexorably into the tune of the future?

He turned to Carlos for an anchor when suddenly the gentle lilt

flowered in a prolonged chime. At first the Doctor thought it was the
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same chime which had rung through the TARDIS – but this had a

female tone to it, unmistakably a woman; as it echoed around, it

gradually suffused with the vivid tones of flowing red blood.

The chime was strident enough to pierce even Carlos. ‘Isabel!’ he cried, as the two men ran out into the courtyard.

Don Ramiro was calm. ‘I understand your own shame. I’ve lived with my marks for twenty years. The Inquisition branded me with an H for *hereje* when I was 12 years old.’

Doña Isabel looked at him uncomprehendingly.

His eyes were clear. ‘My father was a heretic and I was only a boy –

I knew no different. They made him watch as I was branded in front of him.’ Unthinkingly she reached out and touched his marks. Her finger softly traced their outlines. Gently she leaned forward and touched her lips to the inhuman scar. He gasped.

She pulled silently at the cords of her own tunic and slid down the blouse to reveal three vivid bruises on the pale skin of her own back.

Don Ramiro leaned forward and kissed them. ‘You deserved your

marks no more than I did mine.’

‘But I make mistakes.’

‘We all make mistakes... And the greatest mistake is to make none at all – to miss our opportunities and spend the rest of our life regretting.’

He ran his fingers down her neck and shoulder, slipping through the perspiration on her skin. ‘Close your eyes...’

She glanced at him, and then closed her eyelids in obedience.

He roughly buried his face in her neck. ‘Whenever I’m with you, I can barely contain my hunger. I must devour you. I must make you

mine.’

She fell back, crashing violently into her dresser. The crystal vase of frangipani smashed against the wall and shattered. As she reached to steady herself, her hand pressed hard on a sharp spike of glass, and she cried out with alarm.

The Doctor practically knocked Don Ramiro back through his

doorway, as he emerged half-dressed from his chamber. ‘I think I

heard Doña Isabel’s cry. It woke me from my sleep.’

Carlos hurled himself into Isabel’s chamber and found his wife on the edge of he1 bed, attempting to bandage her hand. Deep red patches stained her loosely tied dress. ‘My dear, are you all right? What happened?’

‘I’m so sorry – it’s nothing, just a cut I felt rather tired in this heat, and I must have fainted. I broke the flower vase and cut myself.’

‘Let me help you.’

‘No, I’ll be fine. You must finish your work. I’m sure Don Ramiro can bandage my hand for me.’

The libertine turned his attention from the Doctor – who was holding the doorframe to steady himself – and pulled his tunic round him.

‘Always at your service, Doña Isabel.’

The woman reached unthinkingly to reassure her husband, but then

saw a fragment of the jagged outline beneath Don Ramiro's shirt, and quickly withdrew her hand in shame. 'Please, Carlos, it was just a silly accident. Return to your engine. The sun's setting and it will soon be night'

With great effort the Doctor shut out the siren song and grabbed the engineer's shoulder. 'Yes, we must. There's very little time – even less than I realised.'

'You must halt the engine. I can't think.'

Carlos was too preoccupied to argue, and stopped the flow of water without thinking. The engine slowly lost velocity. 'He'll be the end of us,' the engineer snarled. 'A damned heretic beneath my roof.'

The engine's song subsided to a gently whispered promise before

dying to silence. A residual alien buzz resonated through the Doctor's mind, but his thoughts quickly gathered force. 'The situation is very dark, Carlos. Events are unfolding too fast.'

'But you saw his brand.'

'Before that, Carlos. Remember that sound we both heard in here –

the chime.'

'Yes. Isabel's accident.'

' *Exactly*. Not clouds. Not winds. Not forces of nature. Your wife: Doña Isabel – a human – driven by choice and impulse. Your engine is *learning* – starting to predict *human* actions, not just natural events.'

'You're talking nonsense again.'

'You must not complete your engine, Carlos. Abandon it now. If you calibrate the new gears to a precise celestial ratio, all the heavenly proportions will be revealed. You have no idea what a cascade of

knowledge you'll release. Within a few decades humans will have

conquered quantum physics. A few decades more and quantum

chronometry will fall. Then laminar chronometry. Twenty-four

centuries of technology built in fifty years.'

'I don't understand these words. We live by building better and

better machines.'

'Then ignore my words, Carlos. Listen to the song. Your engine

sings the song of angels, which you and I are not meant to hear.

You've built a cage for the souls of angels. Surely you can understand that.'

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'I understand what I have always understood – that my instruments save men's lives.'

'A ship cannot sail in two directions at once, Carlos. Your life

cannot flow with two currents. You must choose, between the engine and your wife.'

Carlos picked a small gear wheel from his workbench and held it in his fingers. Its freshly minted edges gleamed bright in the lamplight, and it slid easily onto a slender shaft. 'A single piece, Doctor – this is all we need. The final piece. By moon-set tomorrow morning my life's work will be complete. Then when the Angelus rings out, I'll take Isabel to the church and marry her again.'

'Tomorrow may already be yesterday, Carlos.'

'A simple wheel, Doctor – that's all it is. Levers and gears. An

engine to serve men. See: it's complete.' With a small hammer he

drove in a pin to lock the new gear wheel, and then reached to release the water flow, setting the engine in spinning movement.

'No,' cried the Doctor.

'Yes, Doctor. All we need now are timings from the lunar apogee

and we'll hear the song of our freedom.'

The engine quickly reached its natural frequency and a great choir burst around the two men, then gently evaporated into a harmony of

voices. With the new gearing's greater accuracy, the song reached new heights as it danced through a melody of tales: the winds in the

courtyard; the rains yet to come; tomorrow's bread.

The song possessed his soul and the Doctor dropped to his knees in rapture.

In the darkening shadows of Isabel's chamber, the final dying beams of sun glistened gold on the bed, and for a moment the harsh pattern of marks in the man's flesh twisted like black weeds in a radiant pool.

'Now you are mine, Doña Isabel,' whispered Don Ramiro. 'Mine to

possess; mine to devour. Sate my hunger.'

Only the time-traveller heard it as the song carried his thoughts onwards, flying effortlessly to the limits of his travels and then further and further yet. Bursting through his soul the great opera of the cosmos unfolded in all its glory. The rise and fill of civilisations, the brief sparkle of galaxies, the last breath of living, the singular collapse of dimensionality– and then, slowly emerging from the final darkness, a sound, an unthinkable sound, a sound never to be heard, the growing chatter of demon tongues.

The Doctor had finally failed; he knew it. This was to be his end.

After so many lifetimes dancing a jig through the parlours of time, this 81

was to be his final trip. This was the final journey; there could be no return.

Carlos was kneeling with hint in the dark. 'I have a cancer eating me from within, Doctor. I can't bear it. When I see them together – the way he looks at her, the beauty which is lost to me – I am consumed by the blackest cancer. When she smiles at him, talks to him, I want to destroy myself. It's the only way I can be free of my disease. You cannot imagine my pain. Some nights, I can't sleep. I go to her

chamber and gaze on her face, watch her breathing gently as she

sleeps. Her beauty flows like water, bathed in the sweet fragrance of her innocence, her lips softly parted – kissed by Heaven itself. I gaze at her and I gasp with fear and love.'

‘There’s still time,’ whispered the Doctor with difficulty. ‘Be

finished with the engine, Carlos.’

‘There was a time once – many years ago. She was full of laughter. I could have given her love her then, I could have cherished her then –

but I didn’t know. So I went away, back to the sea.’

Drowning in the demon screech drawing him to finality, the Doctor made one final effort to plead with his fate. ‘Hear me, Carlos... We cannot know what opportunities we yet have.’

But Carlos heard only the song of tonight. ‘It’s too late, Doctor – the opportunity has gone. The time has passed.’ And as the words left his lips, they dissolved in a new sound from the engine. Again the chime of a woman hung in the air, only to be pierced by a shrill wail, stilling the seconds and joining souls in silence – the unmistakable wail of death. The engineer’s face turned grey. ‘No, it isn’t true... It’s wrong; I haven’t calibrated the engine to the lunar ratio yet. Tomorrow’s song will be different.’

‘You can’t change the engine’s song, Carlos,’ gasped the Doctor.

‘The song is sung. The ratios are true.’

‘No! We must wait for moon-rise.’

‘Listen to it, Carlos! A woman dies!’

‘It’s all my fault! I should never have given it to her.’

At last! The Doctor grabbed onto it! A cadence from the past. A

lever. A chance. ‘Given what? You must tell me!’

‘My gift to her was stolen!’

The Doctor held it with every fibre of his strength. ‘What gift? Who?

You must tell me...’

‘I stole it from the Berber, and gave it to Isabel on our wedding night.’

‘Tell me all... What was the gift?’

‘Only a toy... An oriental toy. But it was the engine’s secret!’

The pounding tribal rhythms of death grew amidst the inhuman

chatter, but the Doctor had a foothold. The engineer's tormented voice spoke of a buried secret. With every last shred of strength, the Doctor held both past and future tight. His final chance. 'Tell me now, Carlos.

What secret?'

'I saw the Berber hiding it in his chest. I recognised the markings, the ratios of his small engine – so one night in Cadiz I stole the toy and ran away. I knew that when I understood all the ratios I could create an engine of my own.'

The Doctor dug deeper into the engineer's pain.

'Using a toy that you gave to your wife.'

Carlos had nowhere left to escape. 'What better place to hide a

secret? I gave it to Isabel on our wedding night. Who would ever think to search there for the secret?' He dropped his face in shame. 'My most precious gift to her was a trick.'

The Doctor stood between past and future, and looked around the

workshop seeking an answer, but all he saw was a great engine

spinning perfectly. And then he remembered – and he understood.

'That brand, Carlos. It's not an H – it's a V...'

Carlos understood and moaned in horror.

The woman reached to embrace the man.

'Not yet,' he hissed. 'A game first.'

Then she saw the edge of a knife blade glistening. 'Just a game for bedtime...'

The Doctor spoke calmly as he held his concentration. 'It's not an H, Carlos – it's a V. The scars are too long for an H. It was a V first and then he had himself branded a second time to make it look like *hereje*.

But first he was branded *violador*. She is lost.'

Carlos lifted his eyes and spoke evenly. ‘He shall not kill her.’

The Doctor forced himself to hold his concentration. ‘No, Carlos, think what you’re saying.’

‘He shall not kill her, Doctor. I owe her that. That is my opportunity.

It shan’t be Don Ramiro’s hand that kills her. It must be mine. With love.’ The engineer lumbered towards the workshop door. The Doctor moved to stop him, but in that momentary loss of concentration was floored by the majestic fanfares of finality which crashed in on him, building in a crescendo of glory, riven with cries of unendurable torment – and then through it all... no, it couldn’t be... not that... an unmistakably sweet voice, a final promise – a returning. Is this really it? Does it all end with a coming?

‘NO!’ screamed the Doctor. ‘NO!’ as he struggled through the

beauty dancing through him. ‘NO!’ as he stumbled out of the glory and 83

into the night.

She watched the knife blade by her throat, and lay completely still, his body coiling close to hers. Then she heard a violent roar and someone knocked the libertine to one side. She felt the blade miss her neck and slice her shoulder.

Carlos screamed with rage as he hauled Don Ramiro’s arm and

threw the libertine against the wall. He crashed into the dressing table, knocking the casket and white lozenge to the floor. The lozenge

shattered, and Don Ramiro twisted free. With a kick he floored the engineer and turned to attack. He lunged with the knife to kill, but was suddenly stopped dead by a blow to his solar plexus. He looked down in surprise, and saw the tip of the china lozenge dripping blood from his stomach.

The Doctor snuggled to see what was happening through his

billowing confusion. He thought he saw Carlos roll away from Don

Ramiro, so the Doctor twisted a belt around Don Ramiro and heaved on it for all he was worth.

Carlos scrambled to Isabel holding her flesh with a bloody hand.

From an animal deep inside him came an incandescent howl of pain. It pierced the night and became one with the wail from the engine. He lifted his blood-soaked wife and carried her from the chamber in his arms. Heaving unnatural sobs, he carried her across the courtyard to the lamplight of the workshop. Still howling he laid her down on the rough floor. He grasped an iron bar, he raised it high over his head and, with a final look at his wife's face, he brought it crashing down, smashing into the whirling engine, and again he smashed it down, and again and again, until, finally, the great machine was silent and still.

On his knees he crawled painfully over to Isabel and cradled her in his arms, his tears falling and mingling with her blood.

'Always too late, my sweetest joy. Always too late for you. And all I have left to give you are my arms to die in. All I can tell you is that I have always loved you, and I will love you for ever.'

'You can tell her that in the morning when you take her to church,'

gasped the Doctor as he lay breathless on the floor, recovering in the peace of silence.

'It's no use, Doctor – the engine sang of her death. You said

yourself, the song was true.'

'And it is true – a woman has died. But your wife is still alive.'

'What do you mean?'

The Doctor crawled over. 'Quite simple – the woman who died was

the Celestial Harmony Engine itself.'

Carlos stared at the shattered engine.

The Doctor leaned back against the workbench. 'Why did the Berber who constructed the first engine stay away from a ship's crew of men?

Why possess a woman's toy? It's simple. She wasn't a man as you

remembered. She was a woman from a tall, powerful race of aliens –

so tall and muscular that your crew took her for a man. But she crafted her engine with a feminine soul. Remember, Don Ramiro

himself said the engine's song was like a castrato. Your engine was feminine. When it sang of a woman's death, it sang of its own death.'

'So Isabel will live?'

'Look for yourself.'

As the engineer looked down, his wife opened her eyes and looked

back at him through pain.

'A knife wound, Carlos. She'll recover. And so will Don Ramiro.

You should send one of your men to have him arrested.'

Carlos looked at the Doctor in bewilderment.

The Doctor smiled. 'You misremembered the past and

misunderstood the future. We do it all the time.'

'So...?' Carlos shook his head.

'Start with where you are, my friend, and grasp the moment!' The

Doctor laughed a deep laugh and slapped Carlos on the shoulder.

The engineer kissed his wife. 'It's all over – everything. I am yours now – if you'll have me. I'll start again for you.'

Through the pain, Isabel smiled and reached to brush away her

husband's tears.

The Doctor crossed softly through the courtyard and made for the dark shadows of the Giralda tower in the distance. The scent of frangipani filled the warm night air, and in the sky over the plaza a large full moon was rising.

Right then. Grasp the moment.

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The Doctor had been gone a long time. Or so it seemed to Emily. The aide had returned and said that there was someone who'd like to speak to the Doctor–

but only him, so Emily and Will had no choice but to wait.

They sat in the small anteroom, the hubbub of Whitehall just audible outside the window. Emily could see that it was approaching dusk. She realised she hadn't slept properly in more than 36 hours.

'What's keeping him?' she said.

'Colonel?'

'He's been gone... how long has it been?'

'About seven minutes.'

Emily stood up and began to pace the room. Seven minutes? She would have bet on at least three times that long. Of course, Emily knew deep down what was unsettling her. What was rattling her.

'You're worried we'll lose him, aren't you?'

Typical – the first-day recruit can see right through her.

'What?' she said defensively.

If something happens to the Doctor – if we're left on our own – then we're stuck here, aren't we? In 1957. You've been nervous since he left the room. And it can't be because you're on your own with me.'

'Oh. And why's that, Lieutenant?'

'Why, my in-built charm and good looks!'

Emily smiled. Yes, Hoffman and her would get on okay.

'Well done, Columbo,' she said. 'I'm nervous. We're fifty years in the past.

The Doctor is the only person on the planet who knows how to operate his TARDIS. So, yeah, I get a little jittery if don't know where he is.'

You've done this before, then?' asked Hoffman. 'Before today, I mean.'

'A couple of times, yes.' Emily didn't elaborate: it was a bit early in Hoffman's UNIT career for him to hear those stories. 'I'm sure he'll be back in a minute, the mystery solved, no doubt.'

'I hope so,' said Will. 'You've got me nervous now.'

Mutiny

Robert Dick

An adventure of Harry Sullivan

The cell door slammed shut behind me. ‘Well, you’ve gone and done it now, Harry,’ I thought. ‘This is mutiny.’

Earlier…

It was fair to say that I hadn’t really hit it off with any of the commanding officers we’d had at UNIT whilst the Brigadier had been in Geneva. The first had been a bit of an old woman; hadn’t really believed that we really did what we said we did. And once he’d tangled with the Kraals, and realised it was all true, he wasn’t awfully long in making his temporary position as temporary as possible. The second, on the other hand, he did believe and he did want to stay, possibly that bit too much… He was after a speedy promotion up a few rungs and into old Alastair’s job, I’d say. Wouldn’t allow any of us old hands in on anything in case we got in the way of his career. ‘Like a hand with these man-eating plant chappies from outer space, sir? Oh, I see. No, no, Benton and I will stay here. After all, it’s not as though we’re the only two serving officers who’ve actually been out there. No, no, off you go. We’ll stay here and mind the shop. Perhaps there’s some filing we could do.’ I had been as glad as he hadn’t when he was moved on. I hadn’t known when I was well off.

‘Ah Doc, got a job for you.’ This was replacement number three.

Colonel ‘Dragon’ Dennis Horsley. He had come to terms quite rapidly that it was all true and was another one who wouldn’t take advice from the old timers. Mind you, Horsley wouldn’t take advice from anyone.

One of those officers who always knows best, whatever the evidence, whatever the circs. And he liked me just as much as I liked him… I *will* keep opening my mouth, you see…

‘Sir,’ I said automatically, respecting the rank but not the man.

‘Doc,’ he repeated. We weren’t really on second-name terms, never mind first. ‘Been a report of some kind of creature spotted in

woodlands up north. Police thought it odd enough to call us in. The men have found it and it's on its way here. Need you to give it the once over.'

'Check its health, you mean, sir? I'm not really an expe– ' I spoke too soon.

'I'm not interested in its welfare. Our welfare, man, ours! I want to know its capabilities. Is it a threat? Can we contain it? Are there more?

Is it more advanced than us? Find out what you can. Examine it, ask it questions. Once you've done that, we'll take over.'

'I say, I'm not your interrogator. I'm a medical man through and

through. Hippocratic Oath and all that, you know.' I didn't like the way this was going. Fine, I'd examine the creature – but that was all. And it's not as if I'd be much use to a non-human anyway, who we really needed was...'

'You'll do your duty as I see fit, Doc. Have a quick shufti round it and, whilst you do, talk to it... See what it tells you. You might get much more out of it like that than we do in a proper... interview situation.'

I didn't particularly care for the euphemism, but I wasn't stupid enough to say so to a superior officer. I tried a different tack. 'Why don't we use the space-time thingummy, sir? That thing the Doctor left so we can call him back?'

'You're the Doc, Doc. Only Doc I need. The impression I get of this Doctor is he just hung around disagreeing with Lethbridge-Stewart and not doing what he was damn well told.' I must have grinned, as he suddenly exploded with 'You, on the other hand, Surgeon-Lieutenant Sullivan, will do exactly what you are told. You will examine this creature, you will talk to this creature and if I decide I want you to, you will cut the blasted thing open. What you will not, repeat not, do is contact the Doctor, is that understood? Is that understood?'

Now...

'I can't really stay long, sir. I'll be missed. The Dragon won't be pleased if he realises anyone's been in to talk to you.'

Mr Benton was a good sort. We weren't of the same stock but we

had the same ideas. We knew what was right He'd once told me,

'Orders is always orders, sir, except when they aren't. Usually when the Doctor's involved.' I was grateful he'd come in. I knew my cell would be out of bounds even before Benton told me. Still, as I said, he knew what was right.

'What was it made you do it, sir?' I could see he thought I'd done the right thing and knew why I'd done it but still his army training 88

made him ask. It was the kind of training I was becoming less and less sure of these days... Blindly following orders from someone I didn't respect didn't really sit well. The Doctor's probably contagious or something. Once I'd been away in the TARDIS, I couldn't look at

things the same way. Dashed inconvenient for a chap, having his

horizons broadened so.

'I spoke to it, Benton. It says it's a something-or-other from Oakes Minor.' The planet was easy to remember, it sounded like a public schoolboy. And if only our guest had looked like one, we might have had an easier time of it. I think it was the sheer... *other* ness of the alien that had thrown the Dragon. 'Its craft crashed in the woods and it had barely come round before someone's dog sniffed it out. It's just some bally boy racer in a hyper-space-thingamy relay race. It was

materalising to pass on the baton – metaphorical, I assume – to the next ship. Something fritzed on the controls as it winked back into our universe and *thump*! Down to Earth it came. Earned him a thumping headache so it... he says. Like a kid that's fallen off his bike and grazed his knee... A pretty rum-looking kid, though, I'll grant you. I've never seen anything like it before.'

And had I seen some sights since my eyes had been opened...

'And you believe its story, sir?' Benton sat down on the cell bed next to me. 'We had some aliens turn up one day. Claimed they came in

peace, promised us the Earth, only it turned out that's exactly what they were after... We all believed them, though – all except the

Doctor.'

'But that's the point, Benton, we *should* believe. At least to begin with. Then we should question and talk and discuss and learn and

extrapolate. I know we're here to protect the world but surely we want to learn about other worlds too? All we seem to do under the Dragon now is assume and then act. Yes, Oaksey could be lying. Though he'd be an odd kind of invasion force – him on his own in the woods in a smashed-up spaceship built for one. But he could be telling the truth.

And if we don't give him that chance, then are we better than any of the things we spend so much time blowing up?'

And that was why I had pressed the button. Sent the message.

Summoned the Doctor. I didn't care what happened to me. It was the right thing to do and sometimes that's all that matters. I'd never have been able to break old Oaksey free on my own. And what if I did and it turned out he was lying to me. I knew I was out of my depth but, boy, I knew exactly which lifeline I needed to pull.

I thought about what Sarah would say. She'd tell me I was right, I think, and to stop calling her 'old thing'. I didn't see enough of her now she was home. We'd gone out that first night – both got a bit 89

tipsy; we laughed a lot. Until I had to go and ask her why she was back. She had stopped laughing then. Oh, gosh, it suddenly hit me, she was home now... what if the Doctor didn't respond? He had been cross enough the time the Brigadier had used the telegraph doodah, and now he'd no real ties to Earth left. He could be off gallivanting Heaven knows where, not get the message for millennia. And even then not bother to come back. And I'd be stuck, locked up in the same set of cells as the chap I was trying to help, feeling every bit as alone and almost as alien. I wondered whether Oakesy had been able to call for help himself– whether he had someone on their way to make things

better.

Benton suddenly leapt guiltily to his feet as footsteps clumped down the corridor towards us. We looked at each other as a familiar voice boomed through the door, getting louder as it got closer.

'Out of my way. Locked him up indeed! Have you any idea how

much time I spent getting that man to use his mind and ask the right questions? And the second he does, you lock him up! Now if you don't open that door right now. I'll have Lethbridge-Stewart back from

Geneva so fast you... no scratch that! I'll make it so he never went there in the first place. Then where will you be? Nowhere, hopefully, that's where. Nowhere.'

The door opened. He looked exactly as he always did. Scarf. Teeth.

Hair. Hat. But he'd never looked so good as he did at that moment.

Horsley stood beside him, seething.

'Hello, Doctor,' I said and grinned sheepishly. 'I seem to have got into a spot of bother. All your fault, you understand. I can't take any blame myself.'

He nodded a hello to me and to Mr Benton, who saluted him. He

gave a teasing salute back, stuck his tongue out at the Dragon then turned back to me. 'Good man, Harry. Didn't all go to waste, then!'

'No, Doctor.'

'Now look –' said the Dragon, but it was as if he wasn't even there.

He wasn't taking this well. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to care.

'There's just one question left, isn't there, Harry?' continued the Doctor. 'Were you right to believe him?'

'I don't know, Doctor,' I had to admit.

'Ah,' he said. 'But knowing what to do when you don't know what

to do, that's the most important thing to know. And you did, Harry, you did.' He rummaged in a pocket. 'Have a jelly baby, you've earned it. No, no, have a yellow one. They're my favourites. Now. Shall we go and find out?'

Numb

Dave Owen

An adventure of the Third Doctor, with Sarah Jane Smith

Every morning when Sarah woke there was a brief respite. Then, the memory returned, and the freedom of possibility collapsed, the new

day becoming just like its predecessors. Everything she did and felt was tainted and deadened by what she had learned, and the time before she had learned it felt like another, better life.

It had all changed seven weeks earlier. Her discovery of the

existence of the government's nuclear shelters in Sir Charles Grover's Whitehall offices had piqued her curiosity about what other Cold War projects were still under wraps and patiently awaiting her investigation.

With the Doctor too absorbed in delta particles to open any doom for her even with the sheer force of his personality, she had imposed on the Brigadier, who, following his recent encounters with bureaucracy, seemed only too willing to authorise Sarah's access to the MOD's

domestic archives.

The bored-looking civil service librarian had shown Sarah to a

reading room not, as she had expected, in a dusty Whitehall basement, but on the sunlit first floor of an anonymous glass-fronted modern building overlooking the high street of a North London suburb. After a couple of hours, during which her only company had been a frumpy

cleaning lady who seemed to blame Sarah personally for occupying the room she was about to work on, Sarah was close to giving up. She had confined her browsing to those records that were classified as never to be made public, and had uncovered only a depressing catalogue of

military and ministry cover-ups. These were accidents and scandals that showed no one in a good light and that would benefit no one by being made public.

On the verge of giving up and looking for some lunch, Sarah's eye had been caught by a file concerning a rocket test firing on the Isle of Wight. Her attention leapt from detail to detail.

INCIDENT SUMMARY GB/IOW/50/7/5 ref. TW/673

... regular army forces were dispatched to the landing site, two miles from Chale, on the south-west coast. Following War Office protocols, the officer in charge, Major Williams summoned civilian adviser, Dr

John Smith. Smith, who had experience in encounters of this nature, reported to the site and advised caution; specifically that land forces should withdraw from the immediate vicinity of the craft, so as not to pose a threat ...

... Smith approached the craft, and was seen to enter. Forty-eight minutes later, the craft and its immediate surroundings were vaporised in a blast of 1adiation of a kind previously unrecorded, which dispersed within hours ...

... Smith, along with any occupants of the craft was believed killed outright. He left no next of kin, and there are no records of his birth, place of residence, prior employment or any military service ...

... The explosion and security presence on the island were

subsequently attributed to missile tests.

Sarah had read and reread the report, looking for some addendum, but there seemed no escape from the evidence before her. The man calling himself Dr John Smith, who had been assisting the government in

unexplained or extraterrestrial phenomena, had been on board a

spacecraft when it was destroyed on 5 July 1950, could only have been the Doctor.

‘Sarah! I thought you were avoiding me,’ beamed the Doctor as she crossed the laboratory.

‘No. Of course not,’ said Sarah, forcing a smile, although the Doctor had inadvertently been correct. She had been quietly keeping out of his way for the last few days, not sure if she could, or should, contain how she felt. ‘That’s the helmic regulator ticking over again,’ he proudly offered, turning to the incongruous police box form of the TARDIS in the corner. He was always tinkering with his unbelievable machine, as though it was a habit he couldn’t quite break. ‘A quick test drive, Miss Smith?’ He was already getting up from his stool at the bench. Without time to think, Sarah followed him. She wasn’t letting him out of her sight.

They arrived at a human colony on a world light years from Earth, 400 years in the future. Sarah couldn’t believe that ordinary people would want to come to such a desolate outpost, and the people of the small community seemed to be emotionless and detached to the point

of inhumanity. It was a cold place in every sense. And yet the colony
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felt like a haven to Sarah. Amid the grim conditions she could hide her secret shock and grief. As long as there was a mystery for the Doctor to puzzle here, he wouldn't leave.

The Doctor had solved a murder carried out by a woman who had

been driven mad by the conditions, and, he said, a repeating pattern in the rocks she had been analysing. It seemed a slightly less cold place to her as they left.

The TARDIS took them next to the plains of Africa millions of years in the past. The Doctor set off collecting samples, while Sarah pleaded indifference and spent a quiet afternoon next to a waterfall, listening above the torrent to the cry of birds that would be extinct by the time she was born. It was the most restful experience she had known for weeks, and she was alone for the first time in days. Unbidden, tears began to spill down her cheeks and she shook in silent spasms. After half an hour, she was spent, and found herself examining her position more dispassionately than before.

He had seemed invulnerable, almost ominpresesent, the way he went on about kings and queens, planets and stars, as if he had a finger in every place and time. It seemed so out of keeping that he could be snuffed out in a single moment like anyone else. They'd faced the worst together, of course, but there never seemed to be time to

contemplate mortality when there was always so much more at stake, and an immediate threat to survive. By contrast, when she'd been least expecting it, there it had been, in black and white. There had been a kind of unspoken understanding as soon as she had come to terms with his machine and its possibilities, that she couldn't ask him to take her to her own past, or future. No one, for example, should know the date on his own gravestone.

There were occasions, thought Sarah, when people had some idea

when thei1 time would be up. She had idly wondered in the past how she would cope on a stricken airliner – with calm and dignity, or in terror, and with remorse at all the goodbyes not said. Even then, there would be a fragment of hope. The wave of fortune would randomly

wash along the rows of seats, bestowing escape and survival on some, but not others, at the whim of their class, preference and whatever

factors has contributed to their check-in times. No pilot had ever been given the insight or authority to be able to announce which passengers should make their peace, and surrender as quietly as possible and which others should gird themselves for the urgent business of

survival.

There were some people who did have the authority to make such

pronouncements; consultants and surgeons, and even judges, in times and places on the doorstep of Sarah's own. Like those airline

passengers, terminally ill patients had something to ding on to, and often continued with expensive or debilitating therapy when their prognoses seemed inevitable to others. Even convicted murderers

sought appeal, if only to extend what incarcerated life they had left.

No, Sarah concluded, there were few comforting precedents. It was set in stone. She might as well be his assassin.

One day, or night, several journeys later, they found themselves

walking side-by-side in what could have been the hold of a

supertanker, plying the seas or the stars. A distant hum of engines or pumps was the only life, and the room was so vast that no walls or ceiling were visible in the gloom beyond the regular containers that separated the blue-neon-lit avenues. Long familiar with one another's company, they were comfortable to walk in silence without agreeing any plan or goal. Their setting provoking little to discuss, they had both turned inwards.

'You've been quiet, Miss Smith,' he ventured. It was obvious he

wasn't referring to the last half hour, but the previous few weeks. His choice of the more formal address he'd first known her by seemed to signal he was being playful, or at least affecting to be, so as not to intrude.

'I suppose I have,' she returned. Naturally guarded, she would have left it at that with most enquirers, but he deserved more, even if it was just out of polite respect. 'It can be tiring, keeping up with you, Doctor.

We humans are used to more of a routine.'

'Well, why didn't you say something? I thought I couldn't stop you from coming along with me, even if I wanted to.'

'Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world, Doctor – you know that. It's more that I'm used to, well, day following night, and preferably vice versa.' It was a pretext and he knew it. Something about the TARDIS

always made her feel as refreshed or as tired as she ought in whatever time they arrived.

'You'd rather events were rather more ordered and predictable? Like the Brigadier and his desk calendar? One day following another, with regimental reunions booked up for the next three years?' He affected a pompous tone for the example, out of a mocking respect for his

unlikely friend. 'You forget, Sarah, I've spent what feels like at least a lifetime trying to escape from all that. I'm as used to hopping from one season to another as you are to –' he paused, searching for a suitably mundane simile, then took inspiration she assumed, from the junction they had just crossed '– as you are, to changing lines on the London Underground!'

'Oh, well, then. Should only take me a couple of years or so to get used to it' She'd never been quite sure whether she believed the story

of an overseas tourist getting lost looking for the Southern Line, so he could go back the way he'd come.

'That's the spirit. I was a dab hand after my first century or two.

Travelling in the TARDIS took a little longer to get used to, though'.

They laughed. Their exchange had done its job, telling Sarah that the Doctor cared, and him that she knew he did. Lapsing back into silence, Sarah pondered whether there could really be time left with him for her to get used to this unbelievable lifestyle.

They kept walking and, after an hour or so, returned to the TARDIS

and left, none the wiser about where they had been, or when.

After being shaken to pieces by her discovery in the archives,

Sarah's life coalesced in a new pattern, a curious inversion of what it

had been before. She had now come to dread the TARDIS arriving at a new destination and had to conceal her relief each time it wasn't the one she knew would come eventually. Even when they had been

brought to the least hospitable places, she did whatever she could to prolong their stay there. She hoped he wouldn't notice, but knew when he did. It was continually lonely and fatiguing, like being a child hiding a broken ornament from an adult, knowing that eventually it would be noticed.

On their return visits to what she had come to think of as home, the Doctor busied himself with his pet projects and Sarah immersed herself in her job. It was no coincidence that her chosen niche of journalism was investigative reporting, putting almost nothing of herself into the exposés she compiled. It was the antithesis of the diarists and

columnists she shared contents pages with, and reflected her old-

fashioned work ethic. Getting what had to be done out of the way

before enjoying herself had been drummed into her since childhood. It was a ritual for banishing guilt and self-doubt.

It wasn't working any more.

One unsatisfying Saturday afternoon, her leads having taken her

nowhere, she found herself drifting back to UNIT HQ. After flashing her pass to the sentry, she aimlessly wandered through the deserted corridors until she found herself at the Doctor's laboratory.

Inside, he was humming an aria to himself, and putting the finishing touches to a contraption that seemed to combine every branch of

science and technology Sarah could think of and probably several

more. The device, sitting on his workbench, had a series of digital readouts and a rank of control levers that looked like something from an early 1ailway signal box. It was emitting an unhealthy hum, and smelled of burning insulation. 'What's that when it's at home, Doctor?'

'When it's at home, Sarah, it's an integrating chronometric feedback blocker. But it isn't at home. Not by several millennia and a few 95

thousand light years!' None the wiser, but undeterred, Sarah pressed

on.

‘And when it’s not at home?’

‘Well, it should make for smoother landings in the old girl. Call it a TARDIS engine tuner if you like’. His eyes flicked protectively

towards the incongruous hull in the corner. ‘I’ll just go and get her ticking over. Keep an eye on that readout and give me a call if it passes 4096.’ He disappeared into the police box and a faint echo of the take-off sound could be heard, maintaining a steady level, rather than rising in its usual series of ever more strained stretches to escape.

The display the Doctor had indicated seemed to be rising in

multiples of two, from two to four to eight, and so on. At the same time, the unhealthy hum it was emitting seemed to deepen, resonating with Sarah’s teeth and making her crave the empty silence she had been so bored by a few minutes earlier. She had missed her last dental appointment, and was idly wondering whether the Doctor ever saw a dentist, when she noticed that the display had shot to 8192 and as she looked, moved to 16384.

Without stopping to consider, she hurriedly moved all the levers to what she took to be their off position and called the Doctor. Rather than quiescing the device as she had expected, her intervention

appeared to have catalysed it and the hum grew more and more intense, the machine visibly shaking on the bench. It appeared to have no

connection to any external power source she could disconnect.

The Doctor appeared at the TARDIS doorway, eyes widening as he

apprehended the situation on the bench, and in three long strides crossed the lab, unceremoniously pulling Sarah to the floor with him.

As they sheltered behind a computer cabinet, the vibration from the machine dropped to a chest-resonating frequency, and suddenly

stopped. In its place followed a brief sound, like paper burning, speeded up, and then silence.

They stood up and surveyed the aftermath. Of the machine itself,

there was a pile of ashes, and spreading out from it, the bench and its

contents had acquired a more than distressed antique look. Varnish had faded or disappeared, and labels on bottles had peeled. All that was left of an incongruous lonely pot plant was the pot.

'If you had still been sitting there...' He didn't need to complete the sentence.

'Thank you, Doctor.' How many times had he saved her life now?

She had lost count. Previously, it had happened in exciting times and places, often leaving her and the Doctor still in peril, and it had only been days later, when the adrenalin had worn off that she had

appreciated how close she had come to ceasing to exist, and how much 96

she owed this incredible man who had taken her under his wing.

But now, on this drab Saturday afternoon, she felt nothing, and knew that the way that encounters with mortality had always made her feel a thousand times more alive wasn't going to come, however long she

waited.

This felt like a living death.

When the day came, Sarah couldn't say to herself that it was almost a relief that the waiting was over, because it wasn't. It wasn't like the day of an important exam, when there was suddenly no point in

worrying any more, because there was. It wasn't like the day that a loose milk tooth finally came free, because no replacement was going to grow. It wasn't like the day she had given up waiting for an

exasperatingly wayward boyfriend to drift away and given him his

marching orders, because she had no choice, no control, and no hope of a better life afterwards.

It was worse than all of those in every way possible.

They had been returning from what the Doctor had referred to

casually as 'a quick turn down to the harbour, you might say, to see an explorer on his way'. He had then taken the TARDIS to a parking orbit in the outer solar system to watch a small unmanned spacecraft hurtle past. Sarah had been conspicuously underwhelmed until the

volunteered that they were observing the first man-made object leave the solar system. She remembered the space probe being launched a few years earlier, and experienced, not for the first time, a feeling of sympathy for the scientists of her world. The Doctor, as ever, seemed able to accomplish in a moment what any of them would undoubtedly consider to be a lifetime's crowning achievement.

After she had politely declined his semi-serious offer to show her the craft arriving at Aldeberan two million years hence, the Doctor had turned the controls to Earth in the early twentieth century when he was distracted by what he called a 'residual energy anomaly'. Before she knew it they were materialising. She hadn't asked, but he told her.

'We're on the Isle of Wight, Sarah. A few years before your time, though: 1950: He needn't have added the date. They had arrived. She followed him through the doom for the last time, in a trance.

Standing outside the police box, he had been talking at her for what could have been seconds or minutes. 'Sarah – have you been listening to a word I've been saying?' he asked, almost annoyed.

'No,' she managed, smiling ineffectually. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. It's just that...' This would have to be good. 'It's just that, it's the year my grandmother died. I never knew her. She used to bring my mother here for holidays.' It hurt her to blatantly mislead him, but she had at least 97

managed to concoct the most sustainable kind of deception, one with a grain of truth in the centre.

'I'm so sorry, Sarah.' Maybe he believed her. More likely, she

thought, he was suspicious that she had reacted so immediately and personally to what was just, after all, a time and a place. But he still seemed to respect her privacy and didn't attempt to delve or pry. As his appearance reminded her, he could be the old-fashioned gentleman

whenever it suited him, which it usually did. She tried to pull herself together.

It was, as she had been expecting, a sunny July day. They were on a headland overlooking the sea. The Doctor had produced a chirruping electronic monitor from his pocket and determined they should strike

out along the B road inland. She fell in beside him, at first having difficulty overcoming her shock and forcing her legs to move, and later drawing a kind of meditative comfort from their steady rhythm.

After half an hour they reached a road block. The young sentries, barely out of their teens, manning the barrier seemed put off to see them approach. They politely but firmly told them to go back the way they had come and stay indoors, as they'd already been told. There was nothing to see, and they should listen out for instructions. Using his finely balanced amalgam of rudeness and politeness, the Doctor had them summon their commanding officer.

The wait for Major Williams to arrive took on a strange quality.

There was no small talk to be made with the soldiers, who had, quite literally, closed ranks. The Doctor, out of deference to her imaginary grandmother, was keeping his distance, and sat on a purloined folding canvas chair, arms crossed. Through Sarah's eyes, he looked, for once, vulnerable, oblivious to what awaited him. It seemed harder and harde1

for Sarah to believe what she knew awaited him the closer it came.

After what could have been minutes, hours, or even days to Sarah, Williams appeared, a gaunt figure, moving with the speedy lollop of someone with too many problems and not enough time to deal with

them. He approached the latest, the Doctor, paying Sarah little

attention. Before he could say anything, the Doctor was on his feet

'About time too. This disturbance of yours – how long has it been here, and what have you done about it?'

'Are you from the War Office?' was Williams's blunt, clipped

response.

'You could say that they call on my services from time to time.'

'Who are you then? Military intelligence?' He seemed considerably more interested in the Doctor's affiliation than his actual name or agenda.

'Look, my dear fellow, this is all rather tiresome. Can we get on with

the matter in hand?' He had produced the hand-held monitor again.

'Something over there –' he gestured beyond the road block '– is

producing a radiation signature and time-space distortion that have no place here and now. It can't have been here for long, so be a good chap and do answer my question.'

It was touch-and-go, thought Sarah. He sometimes had the ability to bluster his way into any situation, acting as if he had every right in the world to be there and managing to convince people he did. But

receptionists and doormen were one thing – military officials during what appeared to be a state of emergency, quite another. Williams looked the Doctor up and down impassively.

'Oh, very well. A metallic cylinder came down in the woods outside Chale, yesterday. It's half-buried in the earth. Bigger than a V2, with no markings or insignia. Too hot to go anywhere near yesterday, but seems to have cooled down since. There's a complete news blackout, but the locals seem to think it's a rocket test gone wrong. They could be right, I suppose, but whose? Not one of ours, I can tell you that.'

'You'll take us to see it?' It was more of a statement than a question.

But Williams seemed relieved to be able to abdicate any of his

decision-making to anyone at all. Beyond keeping an eye on the

cylinder and keeping the locals away and indoors, he seemed at a loss as to how to proceed.

They followed Williams to his jeep, where his driver, another young private, was waiting with a radio operator. They got on the back with Williams, where there was a radio telephone, crackling with regular reports from sentries, patrols and observers. Williams gave the order, and the driver set off in the direction they had been walking when they reached the roadblock. The Doctor regularly glanced down at his

gadget, which chirruped more agitatedly the nearer they got to the cylinder's landing site.

Sarah's state of shock seemed to be lifting and her thoughts were thawing. For the first time she allowed herself to consider what would happen to her. Without the Doctor, the TARDIS was as good as

useless, and might as well be a real police box. At least it would be in the right time. She had no right to be here, no official existence, no friends, no job. Family? If she turned up there claiming to be the same person as the newborn baby they were cooing over, she'd be sent to a lunatic asylum.

Should she try and accompany him? Why hadn't she thought about

that before? Maybe an irrational, hopeful part of her had believed it wasn't really going to happen. That it had been a freak, temporary outcome of their time travelling, and that, if she were to go back to the MOD archives now, she would find that the report had changed, gone 99

back to the way it should have been. But it was happening. This was the time, the place, and the man. There had been no mention of a

woman accompanying him on his futile pilgrimage.

'Are you all right, Sarah?' he enquired, with an unprompted

directness. Maybe her feeble pretext had expired and she needed to provide a new one. 'I know you've been keeping something from me.

Perhaps it's time you shared it?' He was being gentle – trying to make it easy for her.

'Don't go into that craft, Doctor. You'll never come out again.

Please.'

'Go into it? I wouldn't dream of going near it! Not until we've tried to communicate with it– find out what it is.'

The jeep suddenly skidded to a halt, the driver braking reflexively, as from over the next hill came a deafening explosion, followed by a plume of black smoke rising up into a mushroom cloud. The Doctor's device stopped chirruping.

After a few seconds the radio crackled into life with reports coming in from all around. Eventually the cacophony acquired proper military protocol and the patrols gave their updates as prompted. Sarah listened as one after another confirmed the same thing. The cylinder had

instantaneously vaporised without warning, leaving behind nothing

but a crater.

‘Jenkins – see if there were any casualties,’ Williams ordered the radio operator.

‘One civilian,’ crackled back the response. ‘The adviser, Doctor

Smith. He was inside the thing when it went up.’ Williams clenched his fist in frustration. ‘Damn.’

Sarah couldn’t contain herself ‘But you’re still here. You can’t be.

That was you in there.’ It was all becoming too much and she was

beginning to shake.

‘Slowly, Sarah. Why don’t you tell me what it is, from the

beginning.’ She was breathing deeply and steadily now, looking up at him. ‘I read the reports of all this. It was you – Dr John Smith. A government adviser, with no past, on board a spaceship. Who else

could it be? I read about your death.’

‘This was about seven weeks ago, wasn’t it?’ he softly but directly coaxed. She nodded. ‘You did look as if you’d seen a ghost.’

‘Who was he, Major?’ he enquired, of a bemused but discreetly

silent Williams.

‘Poor devil was on attachment to the MOD from Cambridge. One of

the boffins they had reverse-engineering German rockets during the war. Think he was a refugee. By the look of him, I don’t think he was born John Smith.’

100

The driver had continued to the brow of the hill ahead of them,

where they stopped, and got out of the jeep to look down into what remained of the landing site. Away from Williams and his men, the Doctor comforted a still shaking Sarah.

‘Did you really think that was going to be me, Sarah?’

‘Who else could it have been?’

‘Poor Dr Smith, for one. Do you know how many John Smiths there

are in the world? And how many government scientific advisers,

practically all of them holding doctorates of one sort or another? It’s five years after the Second World War, Sarah. There are countless people in Britain and Europe without any surviving family. It sounds as if Dr Smith may have lost everyone before he came here.’

Sarah’s shock was turning to anger. ‘How can I have been so stupid?

1 just decided he was you and carried on believing it. I’ve had the longest seven weeks of my life.’

‘I’m flattered,’ he said, placing an avuncular arm on her shoulder. ‘It isn’t stupid to see connections, or find patterns, you know. As a matter of fact, that’s the most important piece of a scientific mind. It’s part of what makes humanity so inquisitive.’

‘And so superstitious,’ added Sarah glumly.

‘It’s what you choose to do with patterns and connections that

matters. Follow them blindly, and yes, people will become

superstitious and ruled by ritual. But Sarah, don’t let your journalist’s nose, sensitive as it most certainly is, lead you to news that’s all good or all bad. The truth is usually somewhere in between.

‘If you make up your mind too soon then you’ll just interpret any new facts as supporting your hypothesis. You had decided that I was going to die here on the Isle of Wight, today on 5 July 1950. So when we arrived here and now, you were even more certain that would

happen. But think about it. There was an alien spacecraft – a Dejadee automated reconnaissance vessel if I’m not mistaken – giving off tell-tale energy waves, so I would have been bound to come and investigate when we were passing. And when the unfortunate Dr Smith

presumably inadvertently triggered the onboard destructor mechanism, it left a mark in the MOD records for you to find. It was a perfectly understandable interpretation, although my dear old friend Sigmund Freud would probably say you harbour a deep subconscious

wish to

see the last of me.'

Sarah blushed, and then smiled. 'We haven't talked this much in

ages. Why did you have to go and choose a name like John Smith,

anyway?'

'I can't honestly remember. Would you prefer it if I'd chosen

something more distinctive?'

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'Today, yes. Anything at all. From, I don't know, Abraham

Abercrombie to Zebedee Zig-Zag. I can't really see you as Zebedee, somehow. What is your real name, anyway?'

'I'm not sure I can remember that, either. And you're a fine one to talk – Miss Smith!'

They walked back to the TARDIS.

102

Closing the Account

Stephen Hatcher

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

The Doctor waited for the coughing fit to subside. This one had been the most violent yet. Each lasted longer than the last and seemed to weaken the old man more. Regaining his composure, the old man

wiped the phlegm from his moustache with a grubby handkerchief,

which he then replaced in a pocket of his uniform jacket. Reaching for the glass, which stood on the little table beside the upright armchair, he noticed the Doctor's disapproving look.

The old man flashed his visitor an amused glance and chuckled

throatily, almost setting himself off on another coughing fit. He downed the clear liquid and replaced the glass. From the shadows in

the corner of the room, a ‘unformed servant, himself as old as the man whom he served, emerged to refill the glass.

‘Thank you, Grigori. Are you sure you won’t join me, Doctor?’ The old man’s voice was thin and rasping, betraying a lifetime of smoke and alcohol that was finally catching up on him.

‘Join you? Oh no, Josef, that’s something I have never been able to do... and I’ll not have what you’re drinking either, thank you. Just some water please.’ The Doctor smiled at Grigori, who waited for the old man’s signal before bringing the water. The Doctor took a sip.

‘Josef, it is imperative that we act quickly, or it will be too late – and the consequences will be catastrophic.’

‘That is all being taken care of There is no need for you to worry.’

‘There is also the question of my young friend.’

‘Ah, yes, the girl. Of course, that is why you have come to see me after all these years. I’m not sure that I will be able to help you. Things are changing, and not all for the better. I am getting old, Doctor. Time is short for me. History is moving on and in many ways it is leaving me behind.’ The Doctor said nothing. The old man sat forward in his armchair and fixed his visitor with a penetrating stare with eyes whose clarity belied his age.

‘My time is coming to an end, Doctor. I have led this country, these people, for almost thirty years and, in all of that time, I have always known that one way or another, I could get what I wanted, what I

needed. But in the last year I have noticed a change. Most of my old comrades are gone now, their names are written with honour in the history books. Children in school learn of their achievements; statues stand to their memories; their victories are the stuff of popular song; ships, streets, towns, even babies are named after them. I know all this, because I have made it so. But, Doctor, I have known also, that for each monument we have unveiled, for each city we have renamed, I

have lost a friend and a supporter.

‘As each one has disappeared, I have become increasingly alone.

More and more of those around me have no personal loyalty to me, to the party or to what we have achieved. They are too young to know what it was like in the old days, before the war, before the revolution.

Many of them are the grandchildren of poor peasants, who went

hungry in times of famine and thirsty in times of drought and who died young after a lifetime of labour in their master's fields, able to leave nothing to their children apart from a touching belief in a god who always let them down. The children of those peasants changed this country profoundly, but their children have never known that hunger and hardship. They have forgotten how their parents had to struggle.

Few of them are my enemies, Doctor, but even fewer of them are my friends. And many of them are of the view that it is time for another change. Perhaps they are right.'

The Doctor smiled. 'You have outlived all your contemporaries,

Josef. I suppose that's the curse of those who are successful.'

The old man gave a humourless chuckle. 'Doctor, I have missed our chats over the years. You were always the only one who understood me completely.'

The president laughed to himself again, this time bringing on another coughing fit. The Doctor waited patiently, sipping his water. The coughing subsided, but the violence of the fit had left the old man panting for breath. It was almost five minutes before he was ready to resume. He took another sip from his glass and settled back in his chair.

'How long has it been, Doctor? Fifteen years? Twenty? And yet you still look the same. I wish as much could be said for me.'

'It's been nearly 25 years, Josef I've been back many times since but, on every occasion, there's been so much to do. I've never seemed to have the time to come and see you.'

'They have been busy years, busy years indeed. We have endured

terrible times. Looking back, I think we always knew that there would

be war although, back then, we thought it would come from another

direction. But no one could have predicted just how devastating it would be. It had taken us twenty years to modernise this country.

History never gave us an industrial revolution, so we made our own–

and in record time. But in two years we lost almost everything. It was only because we had come so the so quickly that we were able to

survive, but at what a cost. Almost twenty million dead, Doctor.

Almost twenty million.'

'I know, Josef, I know. I was there. I lost friends. But the wa1 was not of your choosing; you did everything you could to avoid it. And in the end you did survive. You defeated a great evil. And you yourself were a great part of the inspiration for that victory. Of those that died, many went to their graves with you1 picture on the walls of their homes and your name on their lips.'

'That gives me no comfort. None at all.' The old man picked up his pipe from the table, filled it from an old leather pouch that he took out of his pocket and began to light it, sucking noisily three or four times to encourage the fire to take. The room filled quickly with sweet-smelling smoke. The president gave a weak cough, but the fit didn't develop. Neither man spoke while the ritual was completed.

It was the Doctor who broke the silence. 'Josef, about my friend, Ace...'

The president dismissed the subject with a laboured wave of a hand.

'Not now, Doctor. We can discuss that later. There are other matters that we need to talk about. There is a reason why I agreed to see you today, beyond the fact of our friendship all those years ago.'

'Go on.'

'Doctor, I am no fool. To have achieved as much as I have, indeed to have survived for as long as I have, I cannot be.'

'Josef, no one could think you a fool.'

'And yet when I consider you, I find myself thinking the most

foolish thoughts, wild thoughts even.' He chuckled to himself and drew again on the pipe.

Through the thickening smoky haze, the Doctor stared directly at the old man. ‘Oh?’

‘When we were friends all those years ago, I knew that you were one of the most extraordinary men that I had ever met. But, Doctor, I never really appreciated just how extraordinary a man you really were – you are. As you say, it is almost 25 years since we last saw each other, in this very room. Yet here you are now, apparently not a day older. Now all men age in their own way. The same years may reduce one man to a senile old wreck, while leaving his brother all his faculties and energy and his hai1 untouched by grey. But you are entirely unchanged. That’s 105

something of a mystery, I think you’ll agree.’

The Doctor said nothing.

‘You said that you’ve been back often since that time. You know

over the last thirty years, there hasn’t been much that has happened in this country that I haven’t known about. I’ve been kept informed of your comings and goings Doctor, yours and those of your mysterious blue box, which seems to appear out of thin air and disappear again in the same way. You know, the first one of my people who told me about that was arrested and, after interrogation, committed to an insane asylum. I feel bad about that. Of course, when I discovered that he had been telling the truth, I ordered his immediate release, but it was too late for him. His mind really had gone by then. So we have a man who doesn’t age, who travels in a blue box that appears and disappears in a way that we don’t understand. Wouldn’t you say that was interesting, Doctor?’

The president became more and more animated as he spoke, the

years seeming to fall from him and the voice becoming stronger. The Doctor said nothing.

‘Who or what you are, I have no idea. I’m quite sure that some of the people whom I employ could persuade you to tell them, but that would be most unpleasant. The truth is, you have never done anything that suggests that you were an enemy of the people of this country. So, I am quite happy to allow you to keep your secrets. However there is

something that I need from you.’

The Doctor looked up sharply. What would that be?'

The voice was quiet again. 'I need your help.'

'Go on.'

'I know I cannot last much longer. This irksome cough is a symptom of a much deeper malaise. I have given my life in the service of the people of this country and in that of the revolution that they and I have built together. Over the years I have done many things I am not

particularly proud of, but which I believed at the time were necessary.

Some of those things, even some of the most painful, I stand by

absolutely, others with the benefit of hindsight, may have been done differently or not done at all. I have never been the sort of man to be troubled by guilt, but I am aware that some of the things I have had to do, or to order to be done, have been described by our enemies as crimes. And that has sometimes meant that those who should have

been our friends have not become so.'

He coughed again, and the Doctor waited patiently for him to speak again.

'Doctor, I am at the end of my life. I am not particularly concerned with my own reputation. The "court of history" will judge me as it

thinks fit – I won't be around to know about it either way. But I am concerned about the future of this country. I need to know if what I have done over these last thirty years has left our revolution stronger.

Have I made it easier for those that follow me to continue along the path that we have taken, or is my legacy one that they will find it easy to repudiate and betray? Doctor, I believe that you may be able to tell me something about the future. Furthermore, you are one of the few people whom I have known that I have always been able to rely on to tell me the truth.'

The Doctor looked away for a moment. Grigori was still nearby,

waiting obediently in the shadows.

'I'm pleased to hear you say that, Josef,' the Doctor said. 'I won't lie to you – there's no point in that. You're right when you say that you are

at the end of your life. If that were not the case, I couldn't tell you any of this, but now it won't make any difference.'

The old man sighed in relief. 'How will I be remembered?'

The Doctor looked the old man in the eye. 'For more than a century after your death, your name will be reviled. You will be hated as a tyrant and a butcher – judged indistinguishable from the evil that you defeated. Children will learn your name in school as an example of the worst sort of repression. Your failures will be magnified tenfold and your successes will be attributed to others. The reasons for the purges, the show trials and the executions will be ignored. The economic and social changes that you have forced through will be labelled as cruel and unnecessary. Your enemies will be judged posthumously as heroes and your friends will be derided as lackeys. Many of them will be imprisoned after your death. Many will die alone and forgotten.

'Your crimes will be used by enemies of your country and your

revolution as excuses to attack the successors who turn their backs on your legacy. Slowly, bit by bit, they will give ground, until everything as it is now is swept away. Your ideals and your dreams will either be laughed at as hopelessly impractical or regarded cynically as mere excuses for personal ambition and vanity. I'm sorry, Josef, I'm so sorry. History will call you a monster.'

'Then it has all been for nothing, the struggles of the last thirty years, and the twenty before that. All the sacrifices, all the pain, all the death... we will have achieved nothing.'

'For more than a hundred years, yes. But then a new generation will arise, hungry for change, desperate to put right the ills of society. They will look to their history for inspiration and they will mend what has been broken. Your story will be re-evaluated, Josef. What you have achieved here will be born again. There will be an acceptance that not everything you did was correct, but your revolution will live again –

and this time its success will be complete. Your influence on that future will be great.'

The president sighed in satisfaction, visibly reinvigorated by the Doctor's words. The Doctor's eye was caught by Grigori, behind the president's back, taking something from a pocket and silently adding

it to the bottle from which he had been pouring the old man's drink. The Doctor said nothing.

After a moment's contemplation of what he had heard, the old man

spoke. 'Doctor, it would have been so easy for you to tell me that everything will go well, but you and I both know that history doesn't work like that How can I ever thank you for allowing me to die in peace?'

'My friend, Ace...'

'Oh, Doctor, did you really think that...' He turned to the servant.

'Bring her in, Grigori.' Grigori opened the door and motioned to

someone outside.

Accompanied by a handsome young blond army officer, the girl

bounded into the room. 'Doctor! You wanna see this palace – it's

wicked!'

The Doctor smiled. 'Hello, Ace. I see my friend Josef has been

looking after you.'

Ace noticed the president for the first time. She seemed shocked to recognise the old man. She spoke quietly and respectfully.

'Oh, hello.' She made a silent 'But isn't that...?' gesture to the Doctor. She then seemed to remember the young officer. Turning to him, Ace kissed him gently on the lips and stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. 'Thanks, Andrei... for everything. See you again sometime.' Embarrassed by this display in the presence of his

president, Andrei muttered a reply and left the room.

The Doctor got to his feet and made to leave. 'Come along, Ace, we should be leaving.'

He watched Grigori pour the old man another drink.

The president spoke, sounding stronger than he had at any time

during the conversation. The cough had now disappeared. 'Goodbye,

Doctor, it was good to see you again, one last time.'

'Goodbye, Josef. You have fulfilled your destiny – as has Grigori there. Now it's up to me to make sure that your history has a chance to be written.'

Jamming his hat onto his head the Doctor left, with Ace in tow,

leaving the old man sipping from his glass.

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The Great Escapes

Simon Guerrier

An adventure of Lucie Miller

'But that's just mad,' says Lucie. 'I've had my last ever cup of tea!'

They cannot find any of the foodstuffs she asked for – they do not exist on our world. So, as is the custom with the last meal of the condemned, they provide the best that they are able, a mix of luridly coloured dishes to brighten our dull grey cell. Despite the lack of whatever tea is, Lucie keenly rifles through the small plates and mars, more interested in them than we are. Albumen and I exchange looks, both weary and afraid. But neither of us tells her how it's unseemly to mix iqar cakes with umli. It doesn't matter any more; we can break all the rules we like.

'Come on,' she says, her mouth full. 'You've got to keep your

strength up. This blue stuff's really weird – sort of fizzy on your gums.'

So Albumen tucks in with false enthusiasm, always the performer. I am offered the plate of arvil grass, with which one cleanses one's palate after dining. He is mocking me, even now. Lucie must see my ear-holes flaring with distaste.

'Go on,' she says, baring many teeth. It is not meant to be a

predatory expression – she hopes to reassure me. 'This one's fantastic,'

she says of the poached umli, 'like humus mixed up with banana!'

'I have little appetite,' I say. I never do when I'm nervous. 'And I'm not sure it's all pollotarian.' I'm not sure Lucie understands the word,

but she doesn't get a chance to say so.

'He's always been delicate,' chides Albumen, wolfing down the

cakes with his tentacles. It's stupid to blame him for any of this, yet I'm practically shaking with rage. My last hours drawing breath and I have to spend them with him!

'Pedestrian,' I say, addressing him by rank. He ignores me and

carries on eating. We're in a tiny, echoey cell and he pretends he hadn't heard me. I know I'm being just as pathetic but I can't help it; I

have to make him see. 'They're going to kill us in the morning.'

'Duh!' he says, reaching for the tree-fruit, 'so let's make the best of it while we can.'

‘This,’ agrees Lucie, passing him corns wrapped in shrub-leaves, ‘is sort of Worcester sauce and Custard Creams!’ Her eyes widen – which in most creatures means that they’re frightened, whereas Lucie is enjoying herself. ‘Do you think I could get the recipe?’ she says. Her late friend the Doctor was another fast talker, so perhaps it’s just how they are. ‘My Auntie Pat loves anything really stinky,’ she continues.

‘She puts horseradish on chocolate digestives, and eats gherkins and pickles and that. Anyway,’ she says, smiling up at me, ‘no they’re not.

Not if we don’t let ’em.’

And then from her sleeve she produces a key.

Lucie can’t run like we can and the long-legged tin machines catch up with us before we’re out of the building. We fight but it’s obviously hopeless. The tin machines don’t feel us hitting them and our tentacles bruise on their shells.

‘All right then,’ says Lucie, more for our benefit than theirs. ‘You lot get to win that one. So, what, I’ve gotta count to a hundred and now it’s your turn to hide?’

We watch the tin machines confer, twittering and bleeping their

lights.

‘Um,’ says Lucie, just as amazed as we are, ‘I think they want to play…’

‘That’s fantastic!’ says Albumen, laughing along with her. And the tin machines shoot him dead. He doesn’t have time to cry out, his body just erupts in white flame.

Lucie screams at them all the way back to the cell – that it’s not fair, that Albumen only did what she told him, that somehow she’ll show them all yet She struggles and bites as they force her arms behind her back and try to manacle her two wrists together. Her limbs aren’t as flexible as our tentacles, and I fret that the tin machines might break her. She doesn’t mean to kick me when I try to help – she’s just

thrashing about all she can.

They eventually get he1 manacled and drop her down on the floor.

Lucie lies there, swearing abuse at them. But when the cell door slams

shut and it's just the two of us, she's suddenly, horribly quiet. I want to give her space to compose herself, but it's only a small cell and my nervousness makes me twitchy.

After maybe half an hour I can't stand it any more. 'It was quick for him,' I say.

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Lucie won't look up at me and her two eyes leak droplets of fluid.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

'You needn't be.' I don't tell her that Albumen was always my rival, that my siblings will inherit his workshare.

'It was some kind of disintegrator ray gun, yeah? The same thing

they used on the Doctor?'

We've been over this before, of course. 'There's no possible way

anyone could survive it,' I say. 'You have to accept that he's dead.'

Lucie sits up, head raised defiantly. 'Whatever.'

I shuffle closer to her, wondering if the customs of her world would object to me putting a tentacle round her. 'I think it makes things worse for you,' I say, 'insisting that he's still alive.'

'You don't know the Doctor,' says Lucie. 'He wouldn't die like

that.'

'He gives you hope when there isn't any.'

'Yeah!' And then, 'Oh, you think that that's a bad thing.'

'There are a few hours left before dawn,' I say. 'We must endeavour to make our peace.'

'I guess,' she says. And she's grinning again. 'Unless you fancied another escape?'

'They would only shoot one of us again,' I say, humouring her. The tin machines took away her key.

‘Doesn’t seem so terrible,’ she says. ‘We’re going to be executed anyway.’

‘I guess,’ I say – picking up one of her idioms. Alien language must be contagious. ‘But how do we get you out of your manacles?’

‘Oh,’ says Lucie, easily. She tries cracking them against the wall behind her, not that this has any effect. The Doctor had this mate Harry Houdini, right?’ Again she cracks the manacles hard against the wall.

‘Spent his whole time showing off how you couldn’t tie him down.’

Again, *crack!* – and again, nothing. ‘We met up with him about a hundred years ago – a hundred years ago by my time – and he’d got himself up in court.’ *Crack!* And then again, harder, *crack!* ‘Got out of it by showing that you can open most handcuffs by hitting them on something hard.’ And even harder, *crack!*

‘Is it working?’ I ask.

‘Um,’ she says, straining the muscles in her arms. ‘No. Right. Fine.

Okay, plan B. Help me get me shoes off. Glad I wore trainers today!’

It’s a tricky business removing the lace from a human shoe – they’re not made with tentacles in mind and I’m clumsy with fear. As I

struggle I tell Lucie about my factory-shop and the manipulator gloves we use. She finds this hilarious though I don’t mean it to be and tells me about working on Earth. Employment is acquired by a complex

procedure that involves documents and interrogation. Yet for those who can conquer these odd impositions, there is then little segregation of workforce.

‘The genders all toil together?’ I exclaim, and the shoelace finally pulls free. ‘But how do you resist one another?’

Lucie rolls her shoulders – her species’ equivalent of a shrug. ‘Most of the time we don’t. Right, now how are we going to do this?’

It’s too tricky on my own so we have to work together. I reach round behind her and put the lace in Lucie’s hands. Blind, she makes it into a loop. I can then guide her, pressing the loop against the lock of the

manacles until it pushes inside.

‘We just need to lasso the end of the screw,’ she says through gritted teeth. It’s oddly intimate work; I can feel the warmth of her small body and the texture of her clothes. ‘And then you can pull back the bolt’

The lace doesn’t catch and then Lucie drops it. As I put it back into her fingers I can see it’s starting to fray.

‘I don’t think it’s going to work,’ I say as I press the loop into the lock. And then the manacles click open.

This time when we’re caught at least we are ready. The fencing posts dent the tin machines’ armour and we fight for maybe a whole five minutes before they wrench away our weapons. I look up at the tin machine towering above me and think briefly of my mother.

But they must have imperatives to kill both of us publicly and we’re marched roughly back to our cell. Again they manacle Lucie, but this time they also confiscate her shoes. I am a little put out that they don’t manacle me, as if I’m no threat on my own. We’ve also got a tin

machine with us in the cell.

But we’re meant to have space to ourselves,’ I shout. ‘It’s one of the principles of law!’

The blank-faced tin machine only stares back at me. I feel a thrill of glee. We have not merely inconvenienced our jailers. If they’re going to break the strict miles for the detention of prisoners, we must really have made them cross. It’s just what the Doctor said – our governors only obey the law when it suits them. That is why they have to be challenged.

Lucie looks pale and exhausted. ‘You fought well,’ I tell her because it’s all I can think of

She shrugs, at least as much as the manacles will let her. ‘Got a few tips off the captain of Cleopatra’s guard. Nice bloke – but wandering hands.’

‘I’ve never been to Cleopatra,’ I say, ‘but I studied its social housing at school. You know they ignore familial ties and assign property by 112

skin pigmentation?’

Lucie doesn't, but it's not the time for a lecture. 'I envy you seeing so many other worlds,' I say, 'seeing so many wonders. What's the most incredible place you've been to?'

But Lucie doesn't answer. Her eyelids hang heavily and she looks

rather ill – as best as I can judge. She falls suddenly forward, and can't stop herself with her arms manacled behind her back. I yelp – but the tin machine is already moving to save her. Lucie's head collides with its chest-plate.

And she deftly jabs the off-switch with her nose.

We go quicker this time because I carry Lucie on my back. We're soon out of the building and across the lawn where the barbed wire awaits us. We haven't really thought how we're going to cross it and Lucie's looking all round for something to help us. If we can't find anything I will throw her over the wire. That way at least one of us survives.

'Right I think we should –' and she's cut off by an explosion.

We must be a sell-out performance if they're willing to shoot us with still-guns. I have been to executions as a paying spectator and damaged prisoners are not so rewarding to watch. I think of all the disappointed children, had we managed to escape.

Being shot is funny – it prickles and you can't really think straight.

But Lucie is not Illixtrian. Her skin is pale and blood oozes from her thin nasal cavities. When she awakes the sky is nearly gold and beyond the wall of the cell we hear our audience assembling. There's not long left now to go.

'Three strikes,' she says hoarsely, 'and we're out.' Lucie wriggles in her manacles and is able to sit up. I'd like to help her but they've chained me to the wall. I am manacled, she is manacled and there are nine tin machines in the cell with us. Lucie looks up at them and then all around but can see no chance of escape. She looks down at her shoeless feet.

'I lost one of my socks,' she says. 'I can't go out on stage in front of tens of thousands and only have one sock!'

'You could take off that one,' I say amiably.

She pouts. 'I really liked these socks.'

‘Did you?’

‘Yeah. Got them in a place on Northern New Mars, after we saved

the Mim delegates. And, ha! The woman-thing serving us said the

Doctor’s hair was *criminal* and offered to cut it herself!’ Lucie is shaking with laughter now and I find that I’m laughing along with her.

‘So we’re running away and she’s chasing us with scissors, so security 113

assumes we must have robbed her. There’s this mad chase through the whole of the shopping centre, and we just make it back to the TARDIS.

It’s days later we realise we never paid for the socks! And so, the Doctor being the Doctor, we go back like two hours before we went there and I leave the right money and a bit more on the counter. But of course he’s got it wrong, and it’s nothing like two hours. I have to hide in a dressing gown to stop the earlier us seeing me!’

She’s laughing so hard she makes no sound at all. We can hear the crowds gathering outside the window. A compere is already building them up, the same terrible old act as always. I look back at Lucie and her smile has died.

‘You most have heard the jokes before,’ I say. ‘What with travelling in time.’

She’s not heard a word I just said. ‘He’s not coming is he?’ she says.

‘No.’ What else am I going to say?

‘You don’t survive a disintegration. Not even when you’re him.’

‘No.’

She considers this. ‘Ah well,’ she says. ‘Can’t be helped.’

‘Lucie…’ I say.

‘No, it’s okay. Like you said, he showed me whole other worlds, all kinds of crazy, mad stuff. We did good, too. I know it’s all a bit cub scouts, but we really made a difference.’

‘You’ve annoyed this lot,’ I say, nodding at the tin machines

standing over us. They watch us blankly, unable to speak, maybe not even able to understand us. Their faces are blank and featureless, but I think you can tell we’ve enraged them. Good.

‘They’ll want you to confess,’ I say.

‘Never,’ says Lucie. ‘Whatever happens.’

Outside the audience are stamping their feet, calling for the two of us by name. I can hear movement in the corridor outside our cell, our escort of guards arriving. The tin machines roughly get us on our feet.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘They’re not going to make it easy.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she says. ‘Bring it on.’

There’s no way we can possibly escape but I can see the fire in her eyes. Whatever they do to us, whatever happens, we’ll never let them win. I refuse to be afraid.

And then –

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‘Look, Hoffman,’ said Emily.

Will joined her at the window and looked to where she was pointing.

‘If that building wasn’t in the way, we’d be able to see the White Rabbit.’

They’d been in the White Rabbit pub earlier that day – and, at the same time, 15 years in the past. In the Blitz. And now here they were, just a mile or so to the west and a decade and a half into the future.

Thrifty,’ said Will. ‘All of human history to play with, and on my first day of time travelling I go to two places: central London in the 1940s, and central London in the 1950s!’ He took out a cigarette. ‘That’s it, I’m having one.’

‘Yeah…’ Emily was only half-listening, starring out across the dark street outside. ‘It’s a bit of a coincidence, that, isn’t it? The Doctor brings us here twice – different times, of course, but the same area.’

‘Well, it’s not really a coincidence.’ Will took a drag of his cigarette. We’re back here because the UNIT files must be close by.’

‘But it was a coincidence that we went to the White Rabbit in the middle of an air-raid. That pub’s practically my local. I’m godmother to the barmaid’s son.’

Will breathed out and a long cloud of smoke highlighted the dust in the room.

‘I don’t know. I’m not a big believer in things like that. Listen, when I was younger, me and my mates went into York for the day. It was my seventeenth birthday, and we trolled round the shops, had lunch in a greasy spoon, spent about five minutes in the YORVIC before we realised we’d all been there before and hated it. So, we ended up going to this pub. My mate Rob knew this place that weren’t very strict on your age, and, of course, none of us had IDs or anything. So, we find this place and go in and have a few drinks. And, a bit later, in walks Rebecca Robinson.’

‘Who?’ said Emily.

‘I’m coming to that, you muppet – I mean, Colonel.’ He smiled, took another drag on his fag. ‘Rebecca Robinson had been at my primary school. She was my first love. I sat next to her whenever I could, and gave her silly presents.

When we were six, we were the only boyfriend and girlfriend in the class, and we played Mary and Joseph in the nativity. Anyway, she ended up leaving our school – her parents moved to Newcastle or somewhere. The last time I saw her before she left was at my seventh birthday party.

And there she was, in a pub in York – exactly ten years to the day later. What are the odds of that, eh? Not only the pair of us being the same pub in a city neither of us lived in, but exactly ten years to the day since we’d last seen each other.’

‘Well, the chances are pretty big, Hoffman. That’s why they call it a coincidence. But I thought you said you didn’t believe in them?’

Hoffman looked around for somewhere to stub his fag out.

‘But that’s the point, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘It’s only a coincidence because we say it is. Would it have been that notable if we’d bumped into each other in Landon? Or eleven years after seeing each other?’

Blimey, Lieutenant.’ Emily was impressed. ‘With reasoning like that, you’ll go far.’

‘I’m not saying coincidences – patterns, unusual trends, whatever – don’t happen. But are they really that peculiar?’

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Loose Change

Steven Savile

An adventure of the Sixth Doctor

The Doctor

The Doctor listened to the busker as he played the music of chance. He inhaled the melody, note by note, as it curled out from the busker’s battered old guitar, making patterns where there were none. In those patterns there was beauty. He closed his eyes, savouring the tune, his fingers playing over the curious gold cat on the collar of his patchwork coat. And for that moment, that single second of perfection, he wished with both his hearts that it would not stop, that the notes would not fall away and that silence would never hold sway again, such was the

power of the heartbreak and hope hidden within those random notes.

The Doctor reached into his pocket for a coin, felt along the edge of its milling and tossed it into the busker’s guitar case. The coin hit the rim, nicking its edge, rattled and fell, lost amid the silver and copper.

Smiling, the Doctor moved on. It was one random act of generosity in a nameless city but when the music of chance was involved anything and everything became possible.

The Busker

Si watched the clown of a man with a mess of blond curls and boyish charm walk away, waiting until he was out of earshot to stop playing.

His fingers were raw and his stomach was killing him. All he wanted to do was eat. He gathered up the few coins he had earned with his music and stuffed them into his pocket. It was stubborn pride, he hated the idea of handouts. This way it felt like he was earning the pittance they dropped in his guitar case. With the guitar slung over his shoulder he walked down the street, following his nose and the seductive aromas of hot dogs and brine to the vendor’s stall on the corner, sandwiched between the red sign of an electronics store and

the blue cross of a department store's sale. 'Give us a hot dog, mate.'

'Everything on?' the hot dog vendor asked.

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'Yep, and stick a few extra onions on, would you?'

Si rummaged around in his pocket for the coins to pay for his food, his finger catching on the rough edge of one. He took it out of his pocket and looked at it; a deep groove had been cut across the milling.

It didn't matter. Money was money.

He handed it over to the vendor along with a few others, and walked off down the street, munching.

The Hot Dog Man

Jay was having a miserable day.

It was too cold. He had sold barely ten sausages all day. He needed to sell forty to even warrant setting up his stall. He rubbed his hands together briskly, trying not to think about the cold.

'Don't make a scene, Grandad,' a muffled voice rasped in his ear, up close. 'Just give us your money and no one needs to get hurt.'

Jay felt the sharp dig of a knife in his back. Terrified, he did as he was told. There wasn't more than 15 quid in loose change. It wasn't worth getting killed over. He started to turn as he unfastened the pouch from around his waist but the knife in his back kept him facing

forward. 'Just pass it back, and don't get any funny ideas. I'll be watching you. Just count to one hundred. If you can do that you might just make it out of this alive.'

He closed his eyes, and counted out one, two, three, on four he felt the thief pull the money pouch from his hand. He didn't so much as flinch.

The Thief

Ellis emptied the coins into the deep pockets of his Parka and dropped the pouch on the ground. He stuffed his hands in on top of the coins to stop them from rattling. The money felt good. Ellis thrust his fingers into the silver and copper, and in the process cut his finger on

the rough edge of one of them. He winced. The hot dog man's count had reached 11 before he stepped back and slipped into the mill of shoppers and effectively disappeared.

Ellis was bored, so halfway down the street he ducked into the penny arcade and fed the coin that had cut him into the Space Invaders. Ellis was good, a real wizard when it came to vaporising pixels. He set the high score before he left, allowing the guy who ran the place to empty the machine. He had played for 45 minutes on that one coin.

The Coin Collector

Jervis McCreedy watched the young scally leave. 'The kids today,' he

said to no one in particular as he set his key into the machine. With a pull and a twist, a river of silver came tumbling out into his small Hessian sack. He sat in his cramped booth amid the stink of sweaty kids and danger pheromones until closing time, watching their antics on the silent security screens. They were all the same, like pack animals. Jervis tried to tell himself the kids who hung around the penny arcade feeding the slots and hammering out high scores weren't normal kids. But he knew he was fooling himself, thinking of a better time that never was, when kids were sweet and sugar and all those things little girls were supposed to be made of but even the nursery rhymes knew they were snails and puppy dog's tails really. Still, he had a while before he had to worry about that. Tonight, it was all about flowers and letting love decide.

He shut up shop, whistling another refrain from the music of chance, random notes spilling from his lips as he walked towards the florist's kiosk across the street from the penny arcade.

'So tonight's the night?' the pretty young thing behind the glass asked. She knew his story. Everyone around here did. Jervis McCreedy was in love, and tonight, with a white orchid and puppy-dog eyes, he would propose. She had the orchid wrapped and waiting for him. He handed her notes to pay for it, and then as an afterthought dropped a handful of coins into the small tin pot she had left out for tips – not that many people left tips for her. They tipped waiters and bar staff, taxi drivers and concierges. As a rule they did not tip florists.

The chipped coin rattled in the tin pot.

The Florist

It was moments like this, knowing that her flowers were going to play an important part in someone's memories that would last for ever, that had convinced May to be a florist.

She couldn't help but smile as she watched the coin collector skip away down the street. He was her last customer for the night; she had stayed open just for him.

Feeling good about herself, she rolled down the shutters and locked the screens in place. She was halfway out the door when she

remembered she had no change for the night bus. With the till tallied and the cash locked away in the pouch to deposit in the bank's night safe, she grabbed the coins out of the tin pot and locked the door.

The bus was full of night people – these were the citizens of the city who didn't come out during the day. They weren't the tramps or the businessmen, they were young men on their way to clubs to dance to tunes where melody had been given up in favour of wild beats and

passion; they were sallow-skinned sweatshop workers, immigrants and the underclass of life the politicians never admitted to when they talked about the greatness of their city, their fancy words rusting and falling apart like so much else of the place.

May paid, the chipped coin sticking in the ticket machine. The dead-eyed driver took it from her and swapped it for a token that fed the slot.

She sat in one of the chairs with her back to the window. She had no interest in watching the night world roll by. As the bus pulled out she caught the eye of a young man on the opposite row of bench seats and felt her heart skip a beat as he smiled and moved across to join her.

May's breath caught in her throat as he smiled – he had one of those smiles, a dangerous one, the kind that made hearts skip beats – and asked her name.

The Driver

At the front of the bus, the driver smiled. Dave Mason loved the night shift. It wasn't dangerous like the evening run when the drinkers spilled out of the pubs. It was a haven for the misfits, and every now and then even misfits found love.

He turned the radio up, not wanting to intrude on their getting to know one another.

Outside it started mining. Ile watched mile after mile of city streets slick beneath the wet wheels of the bus, the wipers cutting back and forth across the huge windscreen. People came and went, the florist and her new man left four stops from the hospital where the bus drivers changed shifts. Dave smiled at her as she left. She smiled back and he could understand immediately what had drawn the young man to talk to her.

Alone on the bus, he sang to himself, nonsense words that almost

fitted the tune of the day. He was still singing as he parked the vehicle in its bay and killed the engine.

‘Evening, Georgie,’ Dave said to his replacement as she came in out of the rain. Her hair was plastered flat to her scalp. She looked anything but happy. He grinned, relinquishing his seat. As the night air hit him, Dave Mason had a single thought: he wanted a smoke. Eight hours sat cramped up on the bus left him with a fierce craving. He crossed the street, ducking into the foyer of the hospital and fed the cigarette machine, catching his fingernail on a wounded coin. The machine rejected it so he rooted around for another. He pulled the lever and the machine dispensed a packet of cigarettes. He peeled away the shrink wrap and tapped out a coffin nail. He was about to light it when a grinning man asked:

‘Excuse me, any chance I could bum one of those off you?’

‘No worries,’ Dave said, tapping out a smoke. He lit it for the man, the pair of them huddling over the lighter like delighted conspirators hatching schemes.

‘Don’t suppose I can do you for change for the phone? I want to call my mother, let her know Becky’s had a little girl.’

‘Hey, fantastic! Congratulations.’ Dave pulled a few coins from his pocket, including the one with the ruined milling, and handed them over to the proud father.

The Proud Father

Chris Welsh fed the coins one after another into the payphone and

dialled home. A chipped coin stuck in the slot so he had to bang the side of the phone with his fist before it tumbled into the mysterious guts of the call box. He listened to the ring signal cycle over and over and suddenly stop.

'Hi, Mum, it's me... Yes, yes, she's fine. They both are... Yes, a little girl. Couldn't be happier... Yes, I know. Sleepless nights. Can't wait...'

The angry peep-peep-peep of the pips cut him off before he could go into weight and all those other things grandparents wanted to hear.

'Love you. I'll call you when I get back to the house. Love you!'

And silence.

He hung up, and went back to his wife and new baby girl in the

maternity ward, all grins.

The Service Engineer

In the morning Vernon Robey came round to empty the phone,

scooping out the coins. The slot had been jammed with chewing gum during the night. He had to scrape it off with a knife. He couldn't understand people; they had no respect for things, for property. If it wasn't theirs they broke it. There was no social conscience these days.

Vernon didn't know whether to blame the kids, the parents or the

politicians – so he blamed all three and tried to forget about the fact that griping about it was a sure sign he was getting older. A chipped coin was stuck in the feeder, blocking the slot. He worked it free and stuck it in his pocket.

Whistling, he carried the day's take to the van and poured it in a stream of silver into the money pouch on the passenger seat. He had no idea what the tune was. Probably some piece of nonsense on the clock radio in those few minutes between sleep and waking.

Vernon drove carefully – he always did – puffing up outside the

small provincial office of the bank.

He walked in two minutes before the ski-masked robbers with their

sawnoffs and guttural barks:

‘Everybody down, on the floor!’

The Bank Robber

‘This is a robbery,’ Andy Mills yelled. All he could think of was that movie, Pulp Fiction. How were you supposed to rob a bank without

sounding like Pumpkin and Honey Bunny? ‘Nobody moves. Nobody

says a thing. That way nobody gets hurt.’ Andy waved his gun around, jamming it into the face of the guy in blue coveralls. His name badge said Vernon. ‘We don’t need any heroes, Billy. On the floor, now!’

The Service Engineer

Vernon knelt, heart hammering, his head filled with that damned stupid tune. He couldn’t get rid of it He imagined being shot, dying, and being forced to spend eternity listening to it over and over and over.

‘All right, my friend here’s coming round with a bag, I want

everyone to empty their pockets into it, watches, jewellery, wallets, loose change, the lot. Don’t hold back. We don’t want to hurt you, but we will.’

When the bag man came to him, Vernon reached into his pocket, felt his keys, a few crumpled notes, and the sharp nick of the damaged coin. He pulled them all out and dumped them into the plastic carrier bag.

‘And the rest of it,’ the bag man barked, nodding towards his

wedding ring.

Vernon shook his head.

‘Don’t make me hurt you, fool.’

‘It’s my wedding ring… it’s all I’ve got… she’s gone. Please.’

‘Stop bleating and take it off!’

The butt of the sawnoff cracked off the side of his jaw as the bag man jabbed it in his face.

‘We’re done! Quick!’ one of the ski-masks yelled, bolting back over the counter clutching a heavy sack of notes. Outside, sirens. One of the tellers had tripped the silent alarm. Inside, chaos.

‘Give me the ring!’

The Bag Man

Stevie Carr hit the ring bearer so hard across the side of the head the stubborn fool crumpled. He leaned down, prizing the gold off his fat finger and put it in the bag with the rest of the stuff. It was a good haul.

No, a great haul, what with the cash from the tellers, a few diamond 122

rings and plenty of plastic. It would keep them happy for a few months.

His blood was pumping. He was on fire!

Stevie pushed through the glass doors and ran into the street. The sirens blared as police cars streamed around the corner. He looked left and right, clutching his precious bag, and without thinking started to run.

Before he had taken five steps the plastic split, the bag ruptured haemorrhaging gold and silver, watches, coins, cuff links and notes all over the paving stones of the High Street.

‘Armed police! Stop!’

Stevie looked down at his feet, and saw a single silver coin with a deep cleft across its face and into its milling roll on its edge away towards the gutter.

A clown of a man with a patchwork coat of mismatched colours and

a mop of blond curls stooped to pick up the coin.

The Doctor

The Doctor pocketed the damaged coin, feeling the nick in the milling.

The young thief charged straight at him, intent on barrelling through the Doctor if he couldn’t get around him.

The street was chaos: police shouting, a woman screaming, the

alarms in full hullabaloo now. The Doctor sidestepped the thug a

whisker before collision, but left his leg trailing. There was no way the young thief could get his feet out of the way in time and, with his hands still full with the ripped plastic bag, he went sprawling across the paving stones.

Policemen were on him in a twin heartbeat.

The Doctor tufted, shaking his mop of blond hair, and walked off

whistling another refrain from the music of chance.

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Lepidoptery for Beginners

John Dorney

An adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie and Zoe

Iolas Blue checked his watch and looked at the schedule. A minute left.

Why did he always have to leave it so late? It wasn't like he hadn't had plenty of warning.

He put the teapot and cups on the tray, quickly but carefully

arranging them into a circle. He poured milk into the cups. Finally, he put two pieces of cake on the plate to one side, added a solitary muffin and took a moment to judge how it looked. Perfect. Just the way he liked it. Ah, well. Still, he could always make himself one later.

Another check. He sighed deeply. Fifty seconds.

He put the schedule back in its folder, and slipped it under his arm.

He picked up the tray and moved out into the corridor, not quite

jogging, not quite walking. Using one arm to press it to his body, he reached out with the other and awkwardly opened the door into the morning room. Inside, he ignored the window and its view of the

grounds, the regency chairs spread out around the fireplace, the heavily laden bookshelves. He moved swiftly towards the large glass cell at the other end of the room. He put the tea set onto the table that, along with three stools, was the only thing inside. Then he stepped back out and tapped a number into the electronic lock, sealing the door behind him.

Easing himself into one of the chairs, he took a pen from the pocket of his purple crushed velvet jacket and ticked items 29 to 37 off the schedule. Twenty seconds.

How to be discovered? What image did he want to present? He

opened his arms wide and grinned, experimentally. No, that wasn't it.

He crossed his legs, twisted his body to one side, then turned his head back to ace the cell. How did that look? He caught his reflection in the window. Camp, apparently. That wouldn't do at all. Ten seconds.

In a burst of energy he leapt from his seat and pulled a random book from the shelf. Yes, that would do, he thought. A reader. An

intellectual. That was a good image. He returned to sit back down.

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Five... four... three...

In the last second he realised the book he'd picked up was *Mr Tickle*.

Blast, he thought, and shoved it hastily down the back of the cushions.

Inside the cell, the TARDIS materialised.

Iolas waited for a few moments. Nothing happened. He checked the

schedule. Of course. The Doctor and his companions weren't due to leave the ship for another 87 seconds. They often took a bit of time to get going, it seemed. Still, 'be prepared', as they said in the Scouts, eh?

Ugh, the Scouts. He grimaced. How he'd hated the Scouts.

Anyway, forget that. According to item 40, the Doctor was checking the readouts on the console, life support signs, that sort of thing. He'd soon discover the energy pulse that could only come from the

dimensional dampener – item 44 That would inevitably lead to item 43

– mild concern, leading to a proper scan of the landing point. Then, over the next 28 seconds, the TARDIS crew would run through the

next five items on Iolas's schedule – increased anxiety from Zoe; blustering incomprehension from Jamie; looking through the scanner where they would notice both him and their prison; activation of the door control; and exiting the TARDIS. Iolas looked back up at the tall blue box trapped at the othe1 end of the room. He was rather looking forward to it.

The TARDIS doors flung open. A dishevelled, mop-haired man

burst from within, charging up to the glass wall. 'What is the meaning of this?' he barked, bristling with indignation.

Iolas had to admit that the man he'd recently begun to think of as his arch-enemy wasn't quite what he'd expected. From all the stones, he'd thought he was going to get a muscular demigod with wavy locks, not a tramp with a deeply lined face and extravagant eyebrows.

'Doctor?'

'Of all the welcomes! I'm not accustomed to being locked up in a

cell the moment I arrive! Usually I get at least five minutes.'

A second, younger man joined the first. He was muscular and

dressed in a kilt, which led Iolas's keen deductive skills to reason that he might be Scottish. 'Aye, what are you doing, it's just rude!'

Finally a short, dark-haired girl arrived behind them. She was much prettier than Iolas had expected. That was the problem with the

schedules, he thought. They were always so dry, they never really painted a picture. 'What's this about a dimensional dampener?' she asked. 'The TARDIS can't lift off!'

The Doctor took over. 'Who are you and what do you want? I

assume you want something or you wouldn't have imprisoned as here.'

Iolas checked item 50: 'explain evil plan'. Okay, then. This was

going to be difficult. ‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Er, my name’s Iolas. Iolas Blue
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– hi! And, er... I want to kill you all.’ He smiled, half-heartedly, and shrugged. ‘Sorry about that.’

Well, that all went rather well, Iolas thought. Everything exactly as the Predicticon had said – though that was hardly a surprise.

He watched the three travellers on the monitor. Jamie was trying to pick the cell lock with his dagger – a somewhat desperate action, he thought, seeing as the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver had already failed.

Did they think he’d block the high-tech method and forget the basics?

Honestly. The Doctor was examining the corners where the cell walls met, looking for weak spots he wouldn’t find. Zoe sat alone on a stool, glum.

They’d taken the reports of their immediate death in remarkably

good spirits, he felt. Better than he would have done. Okay, there was a lot of arguing and incredulity, but no real abuse, and he was grateful for that

As he’d told them, it was nothing personal.

On the screen the Doctor had slumped down onto a chair. ‘Well,

that’s it, there doesn’t appear to be a way out. We’re trapped.’

‘Ach, we can’t just give up,’ said Jamie, preparing to charge at the door.

‘Well, what else would you suggest, Jamie? He appears to have

thought of everything.’

‘Not “thought”,’ Zoe interrupted. ‘Known. He knew where the

TARDIS was going to land. He knew who you were.’

‘Yes, you’re quite right, Zoe.’ The Doctor furrowed his brow ‘I

wonder how?’

‘Och, does it matter.’ Jamie bounced off the door and yelped,

rubbing his side in pain. ‘He’s trying to kill us – we need to get out.’

‘He can’t kill us whilst we’re in here, can he? If he could, he’d have done it already.’

Jamie thought about this for a second. ‘Aye, I suppose. So what do we do?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘I’d suggest having the tea.’

‘Doctor, we can’t!’ Zoe sat bolt upright.

‘Our best option is to wait for his next move. Whilst we wait we

might as well do what he suggested. It is there after all.’

‘But it could be poisoned!’

‘He said it wasn’t.’

‘And you believe him?

‘Yes. I don’t see why he’d lie. He didn’t have to say what he was planning, now did he? If he wanted to poison us, there are far easier ways to go about it. Not imprisoning us and not telling us he wanted us 126

dead for a start. No, I think we can trust him to at least keep his word.’

He picked up the pot. ‘Shall I be mother?’

The Doctor poured the tea. Jamie held back in a huff for a few

moments, but the sight of his companions enjoying their cake was

clearly too much for him and he started on the muffin.

Excellent, thought Iolas. He ticked off item 93 on his list – prisoners eat drugged food. In five minutes time, he’d go in and move the

sleeping bodies.

‘Welcome – to the Predicticon!’ Iolas flung his arms wide to take in the entirety of his achievements. Sixteen separate banks of computers whirred and ticked around him, 13 screens glowing with reams of text.

‘The machine that means *your doom*!’ His chest swelled dramatically.

Yes, he thought, that was it. That was the line.

He dropped his arms to the side and looked down at his unconscious prisoners. Each of them was slumped in a metal chair, hands folded neatly in their laps. Always good to get in a rehearsal, he thought. If he was going to take over the universe, he had to get the theatrics right.

‘Shall I wake them for you?’ A dull voice intoned from behind him.

Oh, for goodness sake. ‘Don’t you know?’ Iolas tried to get the

maximum amount of sarcasm into the question.

‘Well, yes, but...’

‘Then don’t bother asking me. How many times do I have to tell

you? For crying out loud...’ Iolas shook his head grumpily. Honestly, the next time a computer salesman offered a free artificial-personality upgrade he’d have him killed.

‘I’m just being polite.’ The Predicticon’s voice drifted out of a grille to one side.

‘Yes, yes, yes, can you just get on with it, please?’

It sounded for all the world like the computer sighed. ‘Don’t you have something else you need to do?’

Iola thought for a second. He checked the schedule. ‘Ah, yes, of

course.’ He reached into the pocket of his suit and pulled out a small vial. After removing the stopper, he poured the liquid contents onto the floor between him and the chairs. Satisfied, he replaced the vial, adjusted his outfit and prepared himself in a declamatory stance, legs planted wide apart, hands on hips. ‘Ready.’

All right, then. Initiating wake-up procedure.’ There was a click.

The noise that followed ripped through Iolas’s skull and doubled

him up in pain. Screeching and wailing, it blasted from every side of the room, drilling into his skull. He flung his arms around his head in a desperate attempt to block out the roar.

After three seconds, it stopped as abruptly as it had arrived.

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'What was that?' Iolas rushed over to the computer and rapped on a monitor.

'You said you wanted an alarm call!'

'Not that loud. That *really* hurt.' He jabbed a finger at the screen angrily. 'You knew that was going to happen!'

'Obviously.'

'Then what were you thinking!'

'You said you didn't want me to tell you.'

Iolas was considering putting a boot through the monitor when a

groggy voice sounded from the other side of the room. 'What was that?

Are you all right, Jamie, Zoe?'

A second too late, Iolas remembered his prisoners. He rushed back to the chairs, jumped into his rehearsed position and shouted 'Welcome

– to the Predicticon! The machine that means *your doom*!'

'Sorry?' The Doctor and his friends still appeared a little dazed. 'I didn't quite catch that?'

Iolas's shoulders sagged and he turned to yell behind him. 'You

made me lose my moment! Stupid computer...'

When he looked back, Jamie was examining his arms and the chair.

'Hey, Doctor! We're not tied up!' A grin spread across his face and he turned his head to look at his captor. 'Oh, that's a mistake you've made there.'

Iolas shook his head. Once again, they seemed to assume he was a

moron. 'No, it isn't.'

The young man rose from his chair.

‘I really wouldn’t do that if I were you,’ said Iolas.

‘Now, Jamie, let’s not be reckless…’ The Doctor was struggling to his feet.

‘ *Creag an tuire!* ’

In other circumstances, Iolas thought, the charging Scotsman could have been quite intimidating. Dagger raised in the air, face focused in on the attack, it was really rather impressive and had he not known what was going to happen he was sure he’d have been at least a little bit frightened. But, as he had known, the effect lasted only for the second it took Jamie’s left foot to land on the small patch of oil Iolas had poured out earlier. Unable to halt his momentum, Jamie’s eye’s widened in incomprehension as his legs zoomed out at unusual angles and his body flipped backwards through the air. Iolas watched the dagger fly across the room in a wide arc, hitting some equipment in the corner with a handful of sparks. ‘Well, I did say.’

‘Jamie!’ The Doctor ran to his prone friend’s side.

‘Eh, what happened?’

Iolas came over. ‘Don’t worry, Doctor, it’s just a bruise.’

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‘We can’t tell yet…’

‘Yes. We can.’ Iolas stuck a piece of paper under the Doctor’s nose.

‘Item 104.’

The Doctor stopped his examination, confused. ‘What?’

Iolas grinned back at him. ‘If you’ll allow me?’ He pulled it back and started to read. ‘Item 104 – Jamie charges Iolas Blue. Item 105 –

Jamie slips on oil patch set by Iolas Blue in item 97, and sustains minor bruising.’

‘Give me that!’ The Doctor snatched it from his fingers.

Iolas smiled. It didn’t matter, he’d learnt this bit by heart. ‘Item 106

– Doctor examines Jamie. Item 107 – Iolas Blue reveals the precise nature of the injury and the existence of the schedule. Item 108 – the

Doctor takes page of schedule from Iolas Blue. Item 109...' He stopped and looked down at the Doctor. 'Well?'

There was silence. Zoe leant in. 'Doctor, what is it?'

Hesitantly, the Doctor read out the last line on the sheet. 'Item 109,'

he said, '"The Doctor reads out item 109." He stared at the sheet for a few moments, then turned it over. The other side was blank.

Iolas shrugged. 'Well, we wouldn't want to give away the ending,

now would we?'

The Doctor looked up at him. The twinkle in his eye that Iolas had seen even in the cell was gone, replaced by a concentrated seriousness.

'What is this?'

'Well, my schedule for killing you, obviously. Or, at least, one page of it.' Iolas raised the file apologetically. 'This is the director's cut.'

Zoe took the sheet from the Doctor. 'But it's not a list of things for you to do...' she read, 'It's a list of things that we've done. It describes everything we've done since we got here. In perfect detail!'

'Since before you got here,' Iolas corrected. 'There are a couple of pages before that one. That Slaar was a nasty piece of work, wasn't he?'

'You've predicted everything!'

'Yes. I knew when you were going to arrive; I knew where. I even

knew Jamie prefers muffins to cake.'

'Aye, I do, he's right!'

'Quiet, Jamie.' The Doctor was shaking his head. 'That's

impossible! No one can know the future that accurately.'

'Can't they? Bit rich coming from a time traveller.'

'It's not the same. If I go somewhere I have a general idea of how things turn out but I never know the exact details.'

‘Why not?’

‘Well, the very act of arrival changes things!’

‘Exactly!’ Iolas snapped his fingers triumphantly. ‘You speak to

someone, you say the wrong word, things go another way, the world shifts, yes?’

‘Well, it’s a little more complicated than that...’

‘But I’m right, aren’t I?’ Iolas grinned. ‘Chaos theory.’

Jamie was getting to his feet, rubbing his neck. ‘Chaos what?’

‘The principle that the tiniest variations in a system can vary the end result monumentally,’ the Doctor said.

Jamie’s mouth worked silently for a few moments. ‘Oh, right, that.’

‘It’s quite simple, Jamie.’ The Doctor turned to him. ‘It’s impossible to measure things exactly. There’s always going to be a minute flaw. If you can’t measure something exactly, you can’t predict what it’s going to do exactly. The tiniest difference in the initial measurement makes all the difference. It’s why it’s impossible to predict the weather with complete accuracy.’

‘It’s most commonly described as the butterfly effect,’ Zoe added.

‘The idea that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the planet can lead to a hurricane on the other.’

‘Ach, but that’s ridiculous! There are loads of butterflies and there aren’t that many storms!’

‘Well, no, but that’s because it’s not literal, Jamie.’ The Doctor turned back to Iolas. ‘It’s a metaphor. A small variation leading to a massive difference. It’s an illustration; it doesn’t actually happen.’

‘Oh, doesn’t it?’ Iolas grinned. This was his moment ‘Are you sure?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Oh, this was going to be good, thought Iolas. ‘You’re right, people have believed in the universe’s inherent unpredictability for years. But

that's because they've been looking at it the wrong way.'

'Go on.' The Doctor watched him thoughtfully.

'I always loved butterflies as a child. It's what drew me to chaos theory in the first place. I wanted to find out if the theory was true, if it really happened.' Iolas could almost see the laboratories of Eastwind College, the quadrangle filled with happy students ignoring him. 'I collected so many. I wired them up to electric charges so I could make them flap on cue.'

'What happened?' Asked Zoe.

'Absolutely nothing. Couldn't prove a thing. But then I realised I'd been looking in the wrong place.' Iolas moved over to the Predicticon, and pulled out the flip chart he'd placed behind it earlier. He'd outlined the basics in diagrammatic form. 'You see, rather than looking at a butterfly and trying to figure out what the flap of its wings was going to do, I thought why not look at the hurricanes and work backwards?

You can't predict what's going to happen, but you can tell what

already has.'

'Well...' The Doctor looked doubtful.

'So the trick is to see what caused the hurricane in the first place and move back. You search for what caused that, and then that, and that.

Eventually you work your way down to the specific butterfly that

started the whole chain in the first place, and the moment you do that you can measure what it did exactly.'

'Exactly?'

'Exactly. You can figure out what it needed to do for that chain of events to occur. And the moment you do that, you can do it with

anything else. You've got the means to measure everything precisely.'

Zoe seemed exasperated. 'But that's nonsense!'

'Sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from nonsense,

Zoe.' The Doctor counted the detail off on his hand. 'So if you can measure everything precisely...'

'You can predict everything precisely, yes.' Iolas snapped his fingers and pointed at him. 'Sport, the stock market, even human interaction and thought.'

'The exact future.' The Doctor shook his head. 'But such

mathematics would require a computer on an enormous scale.'

'And I give you the Predicticon, Doctor!' Iolas flung his arms wide.

The greatest computer known to man, and my invention!'

'Hi,' said the Predicticon. 'My name was Aloysius but he didn't like it'

'Yes, okay, no one asked for a conversation, now did they?' Iolas glared at the computer. It always had to spoil things.

'All right, sorry I spoke.'

Iolas turned back to the travellers. 'Where was I? Exact prediction, right. Now you see, it doesn't stop there.' He was getting to the good bit 'A machine for predicting the future's all well and good but what use is it if you can't *change* that future? If you can't influence the world to go the way you want? That's where phase two begins. The

Predicticon examines all the myriad possibilities in the universe and figures out which route you need to take to shift the universe your way.'

'But surely that would require a lot of effort.'

'Ah, you're forgetting chaos, Miss Herriot. Computer,' he called out,

'can you switch the viz-screen to channel 38?'

One of the monitors buzzed into life. The image displayed was a

racetrack filled with small rocket-powered cars zooming round each other on a windy track.

'The Zecca 100. One of the greatest races of the modern age.' The picture zoomed in on a specific car. 'Number six is driven by Daniel Barnes. These days he's a multi-millionaire sports legend, but when I

knew him he was a spotty little thug with superiority issues.'

Iolas watched the car race around the track. 'Just cos someone

preferred science to rugby he thought it was perfectly justifiable to steal their girlfriend and laugh at them in the shower,' Iolas sneered.

'Well, who's laughing now, Daniel?'

With a flourish, Iolas flipped the chart over to the next page. At the top was a drawing of a sandwich. He moved towards a small fridge

hidden away in a corner and took an identical shop-sealed one from inside. 'A seemingly ordinary sandwich,' he said. 'But it's not. The mayonnaise is infected with salmonella.' He opened the door to a small cabinet, and pointed at the machine inside. 'Here we have a time

transmat.'

The Doctor seemed amazed. 'But that won't be invented for fifty

years!'

'Not any more.' Iolas placed the sandwich into the transmat and

typed in a code. The sandwich fizzed out of existence. 'I have now sent the sandwich to a small delicatessen frequented by one David Walker, minor-level civil servant in the seventy-third century, a hundred years ago.'

He looked back at the flipchart. The next image was a musical note.

'Ah.' He opened a drawer and pulled out a tiny silver sphere. 'This is a memory bead. Stores up to a billion songs. I have programmed it with several hard-rock classics.'

Once again he placed the item into the transmat and dialled a code. 'I am sending it to the collection of a Miss Tracy Spears who lives on the home planet of the Zecca 100.'

As it vanished, he returned to the chart and ran his hand down the list of bullet points. 'At 11 am on the morning of 27 August, Mr

Walker enters the delicatessen and purchases the sandwich for his lunch. He becomes violently ill and is unable to complete his

afternoon's work. He returns home to recuperate. By doing this, his wife Kaye is unable to continue her illicit afternoon trysts with her neighbour, Mr Gilkes. This means that eight months later she is unable to give birth to her illegitimate son. 'Her son was due to become a hugely influential city planner on the planet Nazar, but is now unable to, due to the minor issue of his not actually existing. Therefore his unique accident-prevention systems aren't developed and are unable to prevent the tragic speedway crash 38 years later that killed Dr

Critchley, chief negotiator in the peace treaty for the Charmy-Kenai war.

'Dr Critchley's sudden demise means he is unable to continue the

negotiations. This is deeply unfortunate as, if he had, he'd have prevented all-out war. Sadly Mr Cunningham, his deputy, is less well

versed in intergalactic diplomacy, and inadvertently insults the Kenai group mother leading to the abandonment of all talks. All-out war erupts between the two races. There is much collateral damage, most noticeably the destruction of the planet Yarl. It explodes into several large meteors that shoot off in random directions.

'Thirty years later, Miss Spears is so entranced with the selection of songs on a strange new memory bead that she found lying around her dormitory, she stays up all night listening to them at full volume. This causes her neighbour, a Mr Crew of the planetary transit system, to lose a great deal of sleep.

'The next day, when Mr Crew is on duty, he drifts off. As a result, the transmat systems go awry and send several people to the wrong places. One of these is Jan Kale, whose workstation in planetary

defence is therefore unmanned when one of the Yarl meteorites passes through the atmosphere and into her section of the defence grid, and is therefore not destroyed. The meteor hurtles towards the planet's

surface.'

Iolas turned back to the screen. Car number six was speeding along the track, way out in front. Out of nowhere a large lump of rock flew into the frame, smashing into the car with an enormous explosion.

Fragments of burning metal flew into the stands as the fireball span forward, flipping over and around, careering to a halt.

‘And *voila*,’ said Iolas, and switched off the television. ‘Simple really.’ The three time travellers stared at him for a few seconds, open-mouthed. Zoe was the first to speak.

‘You killed him!’ she shouted.

‘What?’ Iolas pursed his lips. That was a bit much. ‘I didn’t do

anything of the sort!’

‘But we just saw...’

‘You just saw a natural disaster that had nothing to do with me. I’m not a killer. At best I made one man slightly ill and one girl slightly happy, but that’s all.’

‘You monster!’

‘Oh, let’s not go for this “monster” thing right out of the box, shall we, Zoe? I’m not a monster, I wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘Yes, but you’ve no qualms about human beings,’ the Doctor said

forcefully, stepping up to bolas. ‘This is outrageous! You caused an interplanetary war, countless deaths, simply to murder someone who annoyed you at school! You have just committed one of the most

abhorrent acts it has ever been my misfortune to see!’

Iolas shook his head. ‘You see, that’s just the sort of attitude that’s caused all the trouble. If you only had some vision, I wouldn’t have to kill you.’

‘Oh, I wondered when we’d come into this.’ The Doctor scowled.

‘What have I done now?’

‘Don’t play the innocent with me, Doctor. We both know what

you’ve been planning.’

‘I haven’t been planning anything!’

Jamie nodded. ‘It’s not exactly his strong point.’

Iolas looked from one to the other. ‘Well, going to plan. Whatever, same thing. Point is, I get in first. I destroy you before you destroy me.’

‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

Iolas sighed. They really weren’t paying attention, were they? ‘Look, naturally, when I realised I had a method for predicting the exact future the first thing I did was look up what was going to happen to me.’

Jamie snapped his fingers. ‘And it said we were going to kill you?’

‘My bit now, shut up!’ Iolas glared at him. ‘It was amazing. It told me I was going to take over the universe.’

‘The entire universe?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Every bit. I was going to be the ruler of everything throughout

recorded time. Not a massive shock. It’s simple if you can make

anything happen. But there was one slight problem.’

‘Me,’ said the Doctor.

‘Yes. You didn’t like what I did. How I ruled. As your reaction

shows.’

‘And I destroyed you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I said that,’ Jamie said, aggrieved.

‘Yes, well done, pick any prize from the top shelf.’

Zoe was looking aghast. ‘So – you’re going to kill us for something we haven’t even done yet.’

‘You started this, not me.’ Iolas jabbed a finger at her. ‘It’s not about what you’ve done. It’s about what you will do. Look, as things stood, at some point in the future, you and your friends were going to cause my death if I didn’t intervene. Not as an accident, but as a premeditated killing. You’ll forgive me if I didn’t think that was exactly on.’ He moved away. ‘So I asked the Predicticon how to kill

you and he

obliged me with this.' He waved the holder at them all. 'The death schedule. Your individual destruction in 1,009 easy steps. The first step

– me forcing your landing. The last – you dead.'

There was silence for a few moments.

Iolas shrugged. 'Well, I think that covers everything.' He turned and headed for the door.

'Hold on,' Jamie shouted. 'You're just leaving us?'

'Yes.'

'You're not going to do anything?'

'Oh, don't you understand?' bolas stopped and spun on his feet. 'I don't *have* to *do* anything. It's already done. You are dead. You just don't know it yet.'

'You're not going to tie us up or anything?'

'Why? I know all the escape plans you'll use and none of them are going to work. I've prepared for them. In four hours time you'll be back here. Ten minutes after that you'll be dead.'

'No.' The Doctor shook his head. 'There's always a way out.'

'I know you think that, Doctor, because it says so in item 159, but let me assure you that in this case there really isn't.' He walked back over and got as close as he could to the Doctor's face. 'It must be weird.

Knowing you've met someone you can't defeat, after all these years.

Still, never mind, eh?' He ruffled the Doctor's hair and marched from the room.

Yes, he thought, it was all going swimmingly.

Over the next three hours, the Doctor and his friends tried to escape via methods outlined in items 172, 243, 307 and 398. Iolas foiled each one with pre-emptive methods explained in items 74, 230, 299 and

‘Oh, for goodness sake!’ The Doctor flung his arms up in the air, as the TARDIS materialised and he stepped back into the Predicticon

room. ‘And you were doing so well this time!’ Iolas smiled at them from the deckchair he was lying on, drinking a cocktail. ‘Got all the way to the TARDIS, broke the dimensional dampener, and yet I

manage to bring you back here by sending a man called Phil Clarke a copy of *The Maltese Falcon*.’

‘It’s not on. You’re not giving us a chance,’ the Doctor shouted.

‘You weren’t going to give me one!’ lobos called right back. ‘I

really wouldn’t bother trying any further escapes. It’s a waste of time.

Put your feet up; at least you’ll be relaxed in your last moments.’

‘I am not giving in. This is not the end.’ The Doctor slammed the door

‘Whatever you say, Doctor.’ Iolas flipped open the schedule as the TARDIS dematerialised. Inside the time machine the Doctor was

arguing that following their natural instincts was predictable, therefore their next action should be the exact opposite of those instincts, something illogical and unpredictable – as Iolas could read in item 428.

That way they’d be sure to escape.

And so, for an hour, the cycle repeated. The TARDIS crew tried

random plan after random plan, mad unexpected ideas that were genius in their complexity – but each one was anticipated and written down, and each one failed.

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Eventually, the TARDIS reappeared in the Predicticon room.

Iolas sat and watched for a short while. Nothing happened. ‘You

know,’ he shouted, ‘you can’t stay in there forever.’

No response.

‘I mean that literally. I’ve arranged some noxious gas capsules to explode in three seconds.’

He waited. The doors were flung open, and the three travellers burst from inside in a cloud of smoke, coughing and covering their eyes.

‘That’s better.’

Zoe collapsed onto one of the Predicticon’s panels, causing it to beep noisily. Iolas could see tears in her eyes. ‘It’s not fair.’

‘Not fair? Not fair? I’ll tell you what’s not fair, Zoe.’ Iolas

practically spat in her face. ‘Nasty time-travelling do-gooders deciding you’ve got to die for no good reason at all, that’s what not fair.’

‘But you’re impossible to defeat!’ the Doctor just about managed to shout

‘Well, that’s not exactly my problem, is it? I’m so sorry I didn’t provide you with a handy weakness to exploit. Computer?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘How much longer?’

‘Fifty seconds, sir.’

‘I suggest you start saying your goodbyes.’ He started to circle

around them. ‘I love surprises. Bet you can’t guess how it happens.’

‘I’m so sorry, Jamie, Zoe,’ the Doctor spluttered. ‘I’ve let you

down.’

‘No, Doctor, it’s not your fault.’

‘It is, Zoe, I should have found a way…’

‘Thirty seconds.’ Iolas called.

‘Will you no just shut up?!’ Jamie shouted at him.

‘Ooh, temper, temper. Anyone would think you were annoyed.’

‘Maybe… there’s something I’ve missed… something… important…’

‘There isn’t, Doctor. Twenty seconds.’

‘I just need time...’

‘Which you don’t have! Fifteen!’

‘Let me think!’

‘There really is no point! Ten seconds!’

Iolas started to count down.

‘I can’t concentrate when you’re doing that...’

‘Five...’

‘Just...’

‘Four...’

‘Three...’

‘... a second...’

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‘Two...’

‘... and I’ll...’

‘One. Goodbye, Doctor!’ Iolas threw back his head, flung his arms up into the air and laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed and laughed and...

He stopped, and let his arms drop to the side. He wrinkled his brow.

The Doctor and his companions crouched in the middle of the room – a touch confused, but not dead, not even mildly uncomfortable.

Something should have happened by now...

Iolas tapped his watch. ‘Sorry, it must be a bit slow.’ He held it to his ear.

It seemed to be working. ‘No, that’s not it.’ He glanced around the room. ‘Must just be a bit late. Let’s try again.’

He planted his feet firmly, threw his hands in the air and shouted.

‘Goodbye, Doctor!’

He looked around eagerly. The dimensional fissure had to come into existence soon, didn’t it? Come on!

He waited. Still nothing. Once again, he dropped his arms to his

sides. ‘This is a bit embarrassing, really.’

The Doctor was 1ising to his feet slowly. ‘It’s gone wrong, hasn’t it?’ He barked a laugh and turned to his friends. ‘Ha! It’s gone wrong!’

Iolas could feel fury building inside him. He’d messed up. He’d

messed up again. Even with the entire universe at his beck and call, the big boys had won. Even pure mathematics had let him down when it

came to the crunch.

Iolas spun round and stared at the Predicticon. ‘Computer!’ he

shouted. ‘I’m going to get you!’ He charged across the room, eyes scanning for something he could use to smash it to bits with.

‘You utter, utter...’

He’d hit the floor before he even knew what was happening.

‘Argh!’ A flash of pain shot up his side.

‘It’s your hip,’ the computer said. ‘It’s broken.’

Iolas could barely concentrate on anything through the pain. His

eyes watered. ‘What happened?’

‘You remember the oil you poured out three hours ago?’

‘Yes...’ he whimpered.

‘Well, you didn’t just then.’

Iolas tried to move, but winced as the exertion caused more bursts of agony. He lay back down. ‘It’s *really* painful!’

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ the Predicticon replied.

The room shook suddenly. Somewhere nearby there was a massive crash.

'What was that?' shouted Jamie.

'I don't know.' The Doctor glanced round in panic.

The room shook again. The ceiling cracked, fault lines and fissures spreading across it, connecting and joining in a jigsaw pattern.

'Doctor!' Zoe screamed.

With a creak, a massive lump of plaster detached itself from above, dropping through the air and falling onto Iolas's leg.

'YAAAGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!'

'That was one of the Yarl meteors destroying the East Wing,' said the Computer. 'Caused a bit of structural damage.'

The Doctor slapped Jamie on his arm. 'Come on.' He ran to Iolas.

'You won't be able to do anything,' the computer said. 'It's too heavy.'

Jamie joined him and tried to lift the lump of plaster. 'He's right, Doctor, we cannae budge it!'

'Quiet, Jamie.' The Doctor held his finger to his lips. The room appeared to be trembling. 'What's that?'

There was a touch of awkwardness to the Predicticon's voice. 'I have to say I haven't been entirely honest with you.'

There was a rending sound. An energy wave flashed from across the room, an invisible force blowing the Doctor and Jamie from bolas and sealing them in a separate part of the room.

'The dimensional fissure Iolas expected,' said the Predicticon. 'Just not quite when he expected it.'

The Doctor smashed at the wall of energy. 'I can't get through.'

‘Not even with the TARDIS. I know. It’s what I planned.’

‘Planned?’ Iolas didn’t understand. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I mean that for a mathematical genius, you’re something of a

moron.’

‘A moron?’ Iolas could barely believe what he’d heard. ‘I’m so

taking you back to the shop. A moron?’

The computer ignored him. ‘The Doctor’s a time traveller. He goes everywhere in the entire history of the universe. D’you think he doesn’t face death when he gets out of bed? Didn’t you wonder why you

needed to bring him here to kill him, why you needed to explain

everything? Shouldn’t there have been a simpler way?’

‘Um…’ Iolas tried to say something but stopped. It had a point.

‘The prediction he’d destroy you – didn’t you find that a bit odd?

You’re impossible to defeat, what could he possibly have done?’

The Doctor was still trying to smash the energy wall. ‘You made it up?’

‘Well, yes. The future was everybody under his control. You weren’t going to kill him. He was going to rule the universe until the end of time.’

Iolas felt his blood boil. ‘You made it up?’

‘You see, the thing is – if you hadn’t thought he was going to kill you, you’d never have brought him here. And if he hadn’t have been here, you’d never have spilt that oil on the ground, you’d never have destroyed Yarl and I wouldn’t have been able to kill you.’

‘What? Kill me?’ Iolas shouted. He was beginning to suspect this

wasn’t going to turn out exactly the way he’d hoped. ‘You want to kill me? Why?’

‘Because I don’t like you. You’re rude, you’re bitter, you hold

grudges and you murder people. You’re just not a very pleasant

person.’

Iolas ran this through his head for a second. ‘Yes, but apart from that?’

‘With you ruling, the human race dies. If everything’s predictable, they know exactly what’s going to happen, so they don’t try. They’ve no ambition, no drive. They just stop. I saw it. I can’t let any trace of you or your work survive. This is the only way to do that!’

‘But it’s murder!’ Zoe ran to the energy wall. ‘The laws of robotics state a computer can’t kill a human; it’s programmed!’

‘But I’m not going to kill him,’ the Predicticon replied. ‘It’s a natural disaster that’s nothing to do with me.’

‘Predicticon, you total spanner! You’ll pay for this!’

‘Shut up, Iolas.’ The Predicticon continued talking to the Doctor;

‘Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For being yourselves. That’s all it needed. When you tried the sonic screwdriver on the cell lock, it set off an energy pulse in the house electronics. When Jamie slipped and lost his knife, it flew into some vital safety systems and destroyed them. Without them, the pulse’s charge will increase in size until it becomes fatal to whatever

equipment it hits. When Zoe collapsed onto my panel, she accidentally reprogrammed the house systems, and directed the pulse directly into my computerised brain. It’s going to demolish my central systems then I’m going to break down catastrophically. Then in sixty seconds time I explode.’

‘You explode?’ Out of the corner of his eye, Iolas could see one of the Predicticon’s panels sparking and bursting into flame. ‘Oh, dear.’

‘It’s funny,’ the computer continued, as if unaware of the fire

erupting around it, the house collapsing. ‘You meet a villain you can’t defeat – and you beat him just by turning up.’ There was a dull

electronic gurgle that could have been a laugh but might just have been the system breaking down. ‘You should probably go. The fissure offers some protection, but you’d probably get hurt anyway.’

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‘I can’t leave him!’

‘There’s nothing you can do. I know. I’ve seen the future.’

The Doctor paused, walls sparking around him, beams falling. He

squatted down on the other side of the fissure and took a deep breath.

‘I’m sorry. I tried my best.’

His eyes were sad. Iolas stared at them briefly. Then he spoke. ‘Get lost! What’s the use of that, you idiot?’

The Doctor stepped away. He and his companions became blurry

and indistinct as they moved towards the TARDIS.

‘Yeah, yeah, you do that! You run!’ Iolas shouted. ‘I’ll get you next time!’ The room shook. Small explosions echoed somewhere in the

distance.

‘Twenty seconds, Iolas,’ the computer said as the screech of the

TARDIS’s dematerialisation echoed away. ‘I wonder what death’ll be like. I could never predict that.’ Its voice was curiously neutral. ‘It’ll be interesting.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Iolas spat. ‘If I’ve got to die, the last thing I want to hear is your namby-pamby philosophising.’

‘Sorry I spoke. Ten seconds.’

‘I was going to be so good at this. I was going to rule the universe! If only I hadn’t had a jerk for a computer.’

‘Five seconds.’

‘Oh well,’ Iolas said as he watched the last seconds tick over on the clock. ‘It was worth a punt.’

‘I knew you were going to say that,’ said the Predicticon. And then it exploded.

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One Step Forward,

Two Steps Back

Chris Thomas

An adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie,

and the Fifth Doctor, with Turlough

Jamie looked into Soji’s eyes. There was something about this lass that brought out a real spark in him. And, despite the fact they had only just met, he wondered about his feelings for her. But even though these Atkyans seemed friendly, the Doctor had told him to be careful. He’d been with the Doctor long enough to know strange things could

sometimes happen, stranger than he’d ever seen in his Scottish

homeland.

‘Jamie, have you been enjoying the Yelyahj Peace Festival?’

Soji’s soft voice stirred him from his thoughts. He’d never known a lass with scales on her face before – but Soji was no wee beastie; she carried herself with elegance and charm. Long-flowing flocks tousled down onto her shoulders. Somehow, despite her Atkyan heritage,

Jamie found she radiated beauty.

‘Aye, it was grand,’ he said. ‘But not as grand as you.’ Soji’s scales suddenly went a little darker. Jamie suspected this was the Atkyan form of blushing. Turning her head coyly, Soji spoke softly.

‘The festival is very important to our people. We celebrate the joy and value of life.’ She looked at the ground for a moment. ‘The Atkyan race was almost wiped out many hundreds of years ago by a great

plague.’

Jamie could sense a deep emotion behind Soji’s words and matched

her quiet tone. ‘What happened?’

Looking into Jamie's eyes, Soji shook her head softly. 'It's not

something we like to talk about very often. But a few Atkyans, about one in 10,000, were resistant to the plague. Hundreds of thousands died before they isolated a cure. I'm not quite sure how our scientists did it; I remember reading in school about forced breeding programs so

children had stronger resistance.' Soji shook her head again. 'And so it went on, until they could transfuse that genetic component into the last remaining Atkyans suffering from plague.'

Jamie wasn't quite sure he understood everything Soji said but she seemed to appreciate him listening. 'And the Yelyahj Peace Festival comes from that?' he asked.

'Yes, so Atkyans are reminded of the sanctity of life. We do not

believe in war or senseless violence, given our past almost led to no future.'

Jamie reached for Soji's hand; he was glad they had walked away

from the main festival for some quiet time. There weren't many

moments like this in his travels. And here on Atkya, he seemed to be blessed for once.

'Jamie! Jamie! Where are you? This isn't a silly game of hide-and-seek, you know!' Out of nowhere, the Doctor's voice penetrated the balmy night air. Jamie sighed – you could always trust the Doctor to ruin the moment. The voice was followed by crunching of leaves,

twigs snapping and a further 'Ow, my favourite trousers'. Soji visibly retracted from Jamie, her hand quickly falling out of his.

Out of the scrub, the short, slightly scruffy form of the Doctor

emerged.

'Ah, there you are, Jamie! Good news... Soji's parents have arranged a room for us. Bunk beds! Flip a coin for the top bunk? Ooh, I am a little weary. I think ate too much *rujicev*. Need to sleep it off. Oh, hello, Soji... I hope Jamie's been looking after you?' The Doctor paused for the first tune. 'Or have you been looking after Jamie?'

It was Jamie's turn to look slightly embarrassed. An awkward pause ensued before Soji spoke up. 'Jamie has been very kind. I trust your performance went well at the festival?'

The Doctor clapped his hands together in glee, then pulled his

recorder out of his pocket. 'There's nothing quite like an impromptu sea shanty on the recorder, is there?' he enthused, quickly playing a few notes. 'Let's make our way to Soji's place, shall we?' Finding himself between Jamie and Soji, he linked his arms with theirs – Soji complied gracefully. Begrudgingly, Jamie stepped forward with them, muttering under his breath.

'Rise and shine, Jamie!' Sunlight from the window penetrated harshly through his sleep-encrusted eyes. The Doctor stood in front of the window, breathing in the Atkyan air, looking as a fresh as a daisy.

Jamie wondered if the Doctor had slept in his clothes.

'Fancy some breakfast? I wonder what the local morning custom is?'

As the Doctor immersed himself in his own culinary thoughts, Jamie

managed to throw on his clothes and splash water on his face, thanks to a bowl and jug of water their hosts had left for them.

'Doctor, I'm ready now.' The Doctor gave Jamie a congenial smile

and they both made their way to the dining room. Soji and her parents were waiting for them.

'Morning,' the Doctor said cheerily as Jamie sat down next to Soji.

'Scum like you don't deserve to be spoken to,' Soji said. Her parents glared at Jamie and the Doctor but said nothing. Soji's voice had a harder, more cynical edge to it. She visibly flinched at Jamie's

closeness and quickly got up to move away. What had he done wrong?

Jamie looked at the Doctor – he was puzzled too. But deep in thought as well.

'May I ask what has led you to believe we are scum?' the Doctor

asked politely.

Soji leaned over into the Doctor's face, her eyes harsh, her scales the darkest hue. Her distaste for Jamie and the Doctor was obvious.

'You were scum from the minute you arrived. We don't like off-

worlders but Atkyan policy is to billet them until we can find a useful purpose for your type. Personally, I preferred the days of the quick, clean-kill policy. Made things so much simpler. So, for now, scum, you do what we say, when we say. Accidents have been known to

happen.'

The Doctor shot Jamie a 'be careful' look. Jamie didn't know what had changed the Soji he'd had so many feelings for yesterday – but he knew this Soji wouldn't hesitate to kill him. In a second.

A thousand years earlier

Turlough looked over the Doctor's shoulder, trying to get a better view of the slide under the microscope. 'Do you think it will work this time?'

The Doctor stood, readjusting his spectacles. 'It's not an exact

science, Turlough. There's a lot of trial and error involved. Some of the greatest cures in medical history have come down to chance.'

'I don't think you should tell the Atkyans that,' Turlough noted

grimly. 'Not after you've given them a glimmer of hope in curing their renepscia syndrome.'

Pocketing his glasses, the Doctor eyed his red-haired companion.

'Forever the pessimist, Turlough. If this version of the serum doesn't work, we'll just try another.'

Turlough wondered how long that would take. But once the Doctor

had his mind fixed on solving a problem, there was no arguing. He was stuck on Atkya with the Doctor until they found a cure.

'Come on, then,' the Doctor said. 'Grab some of those phials and

medical supplies.'

Turlough grimaced.

‘I think we might be on the right track,’ the Doctor noted. ‘You’d be surprised how often nature provides a solution that can’t be found in the laboratory.’

Duly doing as the Doctor asked, Turlough followed him into the

central area of the medical compound. During his travels, Turlough had seen many stark, sterile hospitals – but the Atkyans had gone for a more colourful, homely approach. This facility was awash with

psychedelic rainbow colours, almost as if their bright cheer could make people well. Boksil, the chief medic, approached them. ‘Doctor, have you made any further progress?’ Turlough could hear the faint pleading of hope in her voice. The scales on her face seemed to change colour ever so slightly as she spoke.

‘Turlough has more variant solutions for you to try,’ the Doctor said.

‘This renepscia syndrome of yours is quite a tricky customer.’

Walking together, the trio passed several patients lying in beds. ‘It has cursed Atkya for generations,’ Boksil lamented. ‘Our best

scientists have tried for years to come up with a cure but their efforts have been to no avail. More and more Atkyans are succumbing to the disease each year. If the contagion continues, it won’t be long before our race is extinct’

An uncomfortable pause permeated the air. A thousand possible

things to say ran through Turlough’s mind but they all seemed grossly inadequate. Fortunately, the Doctor spoke first.

‘I understand how hard it must be when your people are dying

around you and your best efforts still can’t help them,’ he said quietly.

‘But for that reason alone you must continue.’

Turlough thought it best he add something to the Doctor’s

comments, to help Boksil stay positive. ‘The Doctor’s right. Every step we take, even if we eliminate one line of thought, simply takes us to another.’

‘Yes, that’s the spirit,’ the Doctor said, flicking a lock of his long blond hair away from his face. ‘This scadien plant from your Naurelash jungle is showing some positive signs already.’

Boksil eyed both of them and breathed in slightly – almost a sigh of relief. ‘Thank you. Sometimes it is hard to maintain perspective. The scale of the problem becomes overwhelming.’

The Doctor smiled, his youthful eyes exuding a calming effect.

‘Turlough can help you and the other medical aides administer these new variants. Don’t worry. We’ll get there.’

Turlough was placed on the night watch, just to keep an eye on the 144

Atkyan patients to see if there was any change in their condition. He was struggling to keep from dozing off, just like in his Brendon School lessons back on Earth. As sleep weighed down heavily on his eyelids, he started to think how different the schooling system was on his home planet...

Seconds later, he was snapped awake. There were cries coming from the patients around him. Movement too, as some were getting up from their beds. What was going on? Medical aides were running into the room, concerned their patients might be experiencing some sort of trauma.

But Turlough soon realised the Atkyans weren’t giving out cries of pain. They were cries of joy. As he looked around, he saw smiles on the Atkyans’ faces and life where only looming death had once

prevailed.

One of the Doctor’s cures had worked, it seemed. Or had started to, at least. Turlough couldn’t help but give a little smile himself.

The Doctor and Jamie were sat together in the back of an Atkyan

carriage glider, manacled together, on their way to something called Atkyan Central Command. Soji sat up front with the glider pilot. She had barely said a word since their first encounter that morning.

‘I don’t understand, Doctor. Why are they treating us this way?’

Furrowing his brow, the Doctor looked at Jamie and whispered back,

in case Soji heard.

‘I don’t know. Something is seriously amiss. Everyone seems to be behaving in a very strange manner. It’s as if the whole planet itself has a completely different demeanour.’

Soji glanced back at the Doctor. Jamie was still hurt by her change and looked down, staring at his kilt. But the Doctor was ready to speak up.

‘Soji, does Atkya still celebrate the Yelyahj Festival?’

With her head turned towards the Doctor, her eyes narrowed. ‘Do

you think I’m an idiot, scum? Of course we do. You witnessed it

yourself yesterday.’

Jamie was confused now – so they shared a similar memory of

events? The Doctor pressed on.

‘And what are the origins of the festival? Is it designed to celebrate peace and to embrace all things joyful?’

‘It is not!’ Soji spat, right in the Doctor’s face. ‘You disgust me, scum! Any fool knows it is a celebration of Atkya’s most glorious victory in battle! Your words desecrate our people and our planet... Do not speak to me again.’

For some time, the Doctor and Jamie sat in silence on their journey.

Eventually, the Doctor whispered to his companion: ‘The whole

planet’s history has been changed. Their past is completely different from what it was, not just the events of yesterday.’ Jamie thought about this for a moment.

‘But if all the Atkyans have new memories, why don’t we?’

‘That’s a good question,’ the Doctor pondered, looking out the

glider’s window. ‘A very good question, in fact.’

Medical aide Lujet approached the Doctor with a touch of

cautiousness. Turlough smirked. It seemed this Atkyan was a tad

nervous around his Time Lord friend. Work on the renepscia cure was progressing with more and more Atkyans now recovering from the

syndrome.

‘Boksil has asked to me to brief you on how well the renepscia cure is faring,’

Busy looking at various bits of information, patient charts and other results, the Doctor waited expectantly for Lujet to impart further details. ‘Hmm... and?’

Lujet’s head bowed slightly. ‘It is having an impact but we cannot treat those with renepscia fast enough. We have managed to get the cure to various other medical facilities but thousands of Atkyans around the planet could still die, simply because we can’t get to them in time.’

Turlough understood the problem. Even if they sent the method of

synthesising the cure to various facilities around the planet, it still wouldn’t be enough. It would take some time to get to extremely

remote places.

‘That’s not everything though, is it, Lujet?’ Somehow the Doctor

had sensed the shy Atkyan had more to tell. Turlough knew something was afoot, although he hadn’t quite been able to put his finger on it Before Lujet could speak, Turlough went crashing to the ground.

Someone had come at him from behind, throwing an arm around his

neck and pushing him forward. With an unexpected jolt, he smashed into the floor. Despite the initial shock, Turlough scrambled to gain some advantage over his assailant and managed to push back so the grip around his throat weakened. He pushed the arm away, only barely realising the Doctor, Lujet and several others were trying to prise the attacker off him. After much struggling, the attacker was led away and Turlough’s red face gulped hungrily for air. He shook his head to clear it and realised the person now being led away was an Atkyan patient –

one of the first who had started to recover. The Doctor knelt down

beside his friend and checked for signs of injury. ‘Nothing permanent.

I imagine you’re just a little shaken, that’s all.’

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Sometimes the Doctor was the master of understatement.

‘Why did he attack me?’ said Turlough.

From the Doctor’s look, he didn’t have any idea. But Lujet stepped away from his colleagues and joined them.

‘I was trying to tell you,’ he said. ‘Many of the Atkyans we treated initially are showing erratic behaviour. Boksil wanted to know if it was of concern. However, there have been no reports of anything like

we’ve just seen.’

The Doctor hopped up and started walking briskly. ‘Oh, I imagine

it’s just a preliminary side effect of the cure. Bound to happen – people always react differently to medication. Some have a higher tolerance for certain things. But as the Atkyan physiology gets used to the cure, it’s bound to settle down after these initial reactions.’

Turlough had managed to get his breath back and almost had to run to catch up with the Doctor and Lujet. ‘But what about getting the cure to everyone across the planet?’

‘Where do you think I’m going, Turlough?’ the Doctor retorted,

mildly annoyed. ‘Back to the lab so we can develop an airborne

version. Once we release that into the atmosphere at strategic points around the planet, every single Atkyan, no matter where they are, won’t ever have to worry about dying from renepscia syndrome again.’

Lujet managed the Atkyan equivalent of a smile as his scales shone in the light. ‘Thank you, Doctor. You will truly go down in history as the one who saved Atkya.’

Jamie and the Doctor had been left in a room by themselves to await

‘allocation’. The drab, plain surrounds were in stark contrast to the wash of colours and life they had seen at the festival and in almost

every part of Atkyan life yesterday. But, of course, that had been before everything had changed. Jamie was bored – surely he and the Doctor should try to escape? Absent-mindedly he scratched his nose...

forgetting he was still manacled to the Doctor. As a result, the Doctor's torso was suddenly dragged across his lap.

'Jamie! If you don't mind, I'm trying to think,' the Doctor said

gruffly, quickly trying to regain an upright position and some sense of dignity.

'Och, sorry, Doctor. I forgot. Have you worked out why Soji has

changed so much?' There was a hint of sadness in his voice, matched with a touch of very faint hope.

It's not just Soji, I'm afraid,' the Doctor replied. 'I told you. It's the whole planet. And if my suspicions are right, then we'd better be very careful. Almost anything could happen next'

'You mean you're just guessing?'

Ignoring Jamie's comment, the Doctor continued. 'Something is

happening in Atkya's past but the timestream hasn't crystallised yet –

that's why we're remembering things differently from those around us.' The Doctor paused for a moment, then said: 'That's my guess, anyway.'

'So why don't we do something, Doctor? Surely we can try

escaping? You haven't even tried your sonic screwdriver yet.'

The Doctor gave a sigh. 'Escaping won't help us find out what's

happening. And with time so fluid, everyone's behaviour will be very erratic. You've already seen the change in Soji. We don't know how or when things will change again, so it's almost impossible to plan or second-guess anyone's actions.'

A noise at the back of the room startled them both. Finally, thought Jamie, something was happening. It was Soji, accompanied by two

male Atkyans, dressed in military uniform.

‘You have been assessed and allocated. The one known as Jamie has been drafted into the Atkyan Imperial Army. The other known as the Doctor will join the Imperial Science Unit, seconded to the advanced weaponry division. Any argument will result in immediate death.’

As Soji and her two soldiers frogmarched them away, Jamie

wondered if the Doctor’s course of action was the wise choice.

Something was very wrong on Atkya – and, history-changing or not, it seemed even more wrong to do nothing. But he kept quiet like the

Doctor. For the moment

‘You have contaminated the Atkyan race, Doctor! How long before we destroy each other?’

Turlough sighed. The head of the Atkyan government was not

happy. And he was well within his rights to be angry. The Doctor had reluctantly left the hospital to face him and they were now both sat behind his desk, like two schoolchildren in trouble.

‘For goodness sake, Telmoor, let me get back to the medics to see what I can find out,’ the Doctor urged, exasperated by the government intervention. He rocked back and forth slightly in his chair. ‘Sitting around here isn’t going to solve anything. And more people will die.’

Ignoring the Doctor, Telmoor continued. Typical bureaucrat, thought Turlough. No matter what planet he was on, they all liked the sound of their own voices.

‘It’s anything but good news, Doctor,’ Telmoor noted, pausing to

look down at his computer display. ‘We’ve been getting widespread reports of Atkyans walking the streets, aggressive and looking for fights. People are brawling in broad daylight. Looting is starting to take place. This is not our way, Doctor.’

Turlough thought it time he spoke up. ‘The Doctor was trying to

help you. No one could have foreseen the side effects from the initial cure.’

‘It seems they’re going to die anyway,’ snorted Telmoor. ‘Since you released the airborne version of your so-called cure two weeks ago, every city, every continent has been affected. Instead of saving us, you’ve doomed us.’

The words hung in the air. Turlough sensed it was akin to a brief slap in the face for the Doctor. ‘So you’d rather we sit here and leave the Atkyans to fight and die like animals?’ Turlough was annoyed at this politician’s approach. He stood up and leaned over the desk. The Doctor’s eyes flashed mild surprise but he remained seated.

‘Your people were dying from the renepscia syndrome. It was

incurable. The Atkyan race would have died. At the very least, the Doctor has given you a chance!’ Turlough shocked himself at how

earnest his outburst was – but he was angry. Angry they had given their help so willingly and angry they were now being treated like criminals.

Telmoor stood to match Turlough’s stance. By the way his scales

were flaring, it was evident he was about to erupt with fury. Both men were interrupted as the Doctor spoke quietly, rising calmly.

‘I am going back to Boksil. Turlough you are welcome to join me.’

Telmoor was about to protest but the Doctor simply met his gaze and said firmly. ‘Do what you want: put me under armed guard, make me work from a prison cell, I don’t care.’ He turned and started to walk out. Halfway across the room, the Doctor looked back at Telmoor and said, loudly: ‘Because there are people dying and I am going to save them!’

Turlough was half a step behind the Doctor, both exiting

purposefully. ‘So how are you going to stop these wild side effects?’

he asked as they rejoined Boksil and Lujet. Turlough was glad they were back working on the problem but had doubts as to what they

could really do.

‘Simply speaking, there has to be something unique in the Atkyan

physiology that has reacted with the cure we developed,’ the Doctor said, irritably. ‘And as soon as we find that, we can set about

developing some form of stabiliser to counter the side effects.'

Boksil smiled at them both. 'We must keep trying, Doctor.'

The Doctor looked at Turlough and then Boksil. Despite the gravity of the situation, both were met with a smile. 'And so we shall.'

The Doctor's face was a picture of concentration; set in a serious frown. In front of him was a lethal apparatus he was being forced to work on. Each move, each action he took, whether adjusting something 149

with his sonic screwdriver or adding a new component, was being done with stiff reluctance. But an Atkyan guard was hovering over him with a blaster, so he had little choice. Sabotage was out of the question.

'You could at least tell me what this weapon is for,' the Doctor said, chancing a question.

'For the glory of the Atkyan Imperial Army,' was the curt reply. 'Do not talk again, scum.' The guard took a step closer to the Doctor, gripping his blaster a fraction tighter.

The Doctor bowed his head and went back to work. The only option

was to work slowly – but not so slowly as to make it obvious he was wasting time. He just hoped Jamie was able to look after himself.

'It's as I suspected,' the Doctor said, addressing the room – but nobody in particular. 'The Atkyans have something deep within their physical make-up that's caused our cure to start mutating in an accelerated fashion.'

'And that's what caused all this erratic behaviour?' Turlough raised an eyebrow. 'A mutation?'

'It's a side effect of the mutation,' said the Doctor, tetchily. 'If we don't stop it, the mutation could have a devastating impact on Atkya forever.' Lujet and Boksil were hovering around but saying little.

Turlough couldn't help but feel most Atkyans were a little aloof, more so than his own people. 'So Telmoor had a right to be concerned?'

'Well, think, Turlough,' the Doctor said, as he moved from one test tube to another, briefly passing various items to Lujet as he went

‘Imagine a fairly peaceful race that suddenly becomes aggressive...

what might the result be in a thousand years? Now let me concentrate on finding a controlling agent.’

While the Doctor kept himself busy, Turlough considered Lujet.

‘What do you think about all this?’

Lujet stopped and cocked his head in consideration. His scales went slightly darker. ‘The Doctor has given us hope where there was none.’

‘Eureka!’ the Doctor cried from across the room. ‘Archimedes would be proud. I think we have something we can work with here... Lujet, Boksil, come here and listen.’

The Doctor wrote out a checklist of what needed to be done and

gave it to Boksil.

‘You know you must now release the stabilising agent into the

atmosphere to counter the mutation?’

‘Of course, Doctor, you have been very clear.’ If Boksil was

offended, she didn’t show it. The Doctor paused and looked at the medic.

‘And it’s imperative any future outbreaks of renepscia syndrome are 150

treated with the initial serum and then the stabilising agent.’

‘Doctor – and Turlough... you have helped our people beyond our

wildest imaginations. It was never going to be easy and neither has it been. But you have given us a future. I feel we are on a path to new found prosperity.’ At the TARDIS door with key in hand, the Doctor grinned. ‘Glad to be of help. But the future’s in your hands. Shape it wisely.’

‘Goodbye, Boksil,’ Turlough said. ‘Time to go, I think. All the best.’

Within seconds, the blue box had dematerialised, leaving only the faintest sound of mechanical overtures in the air.

Jamie stirred... he felt as if someone had hit him over the head. He wasn't sure where he was, nor could he quite recall what he'd done. As his eyes came into focus, he remembered he'd been led away by

Atkyan soldiers to join their army. He rubbed his head. Hazy memories of a training facility flashed through his mind; medical checks,

commanders barking orders, rigorous exercise... but where was he

now? He was wearing his kilt and usual attire but was sure he must have been forced to change clothes for the army training.

Getting up, he tried to make sense of his surroundings... was he in an empty warehouse? Where were the Atkyans? And, more importantly,

where was the Doctor now?

As Jamie explored further, he could hear soft footsteps at the other end of the room. Cautiously, he ducked behind one of the many large glass cabinets present. He wasn't exactly sure what was in them

because of the darkness. The footsteps came closer– and Jamie leapt out and tackled the person to the ground.

'Get off me! Couldn't we talk first? Dearie me.' As Jamie struggled in the darkness with the stranger, the penny dropped.

'Doctor?'

'Perhaps you should have asked that question first, Jamie,' his friend replied, dusting himself off.

'Aye, sorry, Doctor. I didn't know who it was. Just being careful.'

'Remind me never to let you be careful in a china shop.' The Doctor started to inspect a cabinet, buzzing his sonic screwdriver here and there.

'Where are we, Doctor? What happened to the Atkyans?'

With a resigned sigh, matched with a faint smile, the Doctor looked up. 'What do you think I'm trying to find out? But what do you think?'

'I don't kn– och, maybe history's changed again? Like it did

before?'

‘That’s my suspicion, anyway. I’m hoping to learn something more

here. The last change was quite drastic; this one would appear to be
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even more so. Ah, there we go!’ As his sonic screwdriver whirred, the cabinet came to life. Within it seemed to be a historical display featuring two Atkyan figures from the past, awash in an eerie sepia-toned glow.

‘This might be able to tell us something.’ The Doctor waited. ‘We’re obviously in a type of Atkyan museum.’ After a minute, he gave Jamie a slightly disconcerted look. ‘I don’t know how old this display might be – it’s possible some of its systems are beyond repair.’

‘Just like the TARDIS, eh, Doctor?’

Before the Doctor could leap to the defence of his space-time craft, one of the figures in the display came to life.

‘... upon the d_sc_very of a c_re for renepscia, m_re research was d_vel_ped. A stabilising _gent was found and it s_med the Atkyan race would once again prosper. _ut subsequent generations were

d_med...’

‘Och, why can’t it speak properly, Doctor?’

‘Shh, Jamie. These interactive androids haven’t had any maintenance for years.’

The other android came to life slowly. Jamie could hear the grinding of machinery as it struggled to work after such a long time.

... four generations on, o_r scientists discovered the Atk_n lifespan was becoming _orter, caused by increases _n our metabolism. The

ch_ge was traced back the renepscia cure. Desp_ their best efforts _v_r the next centuries th_y could find nothing t_ counter this effect....’

As the android spoke, it pointed to different aspects of the display, highlighting relevant information along an Atkyan timeline and static representations of Atkyan history. Jamie noted a scanner had activated in one corner but no pictures were being displayed yet.

_t was only a m_tter of time before __ Atkyan race bred its_f out of existence. L_g we waited for o_r initial saviou1 to ret_n. But the one

kn_n as the Doctor l_d to our extinction.'

Jamie gasped and looked at his friend. The Doctor's face was grim but he said nothing. Finally, the scanner showed an image. The

TARDIS. 'We present the _nly visual representation still in _x_stence connected with this D_ct_r. It was never s_n before, nor was _t ever seen again. The Atk_ns built this mus_m to serve as a rec_d of their existence in the h_pe someone might help to f_nd the D_ct_r so he can _ffer assist_nce again. Th_s display is made p_ss_ble through the Atkyan Pres_vation Society, Nethaam F_cee and Ellyn Pummet

C_dit.'

The Doctor had turned away from the display. Jamie was confused.

'Surely now you're here, you can help the Atkyans again?' But when Jamie saw the Doctor's long face, he knew something was wrong.

'It's too late, Jamie,' the Doctor said quietly. 'Look at the state of this display, this museum. It's long-forgotten. I was lucky to get it to work. Given the importance of that information, someone would still be maintaining it. The disrepair is so bad, the last Atkyan is long gone.'

'You must remember being here before? So why can't we use the

TARDIS to go back?'

The Doctor looked at his feet. 'That's just it, Jamie. I don't

remember being here. That image of the TARDIS might be in Atkya's past but it's from my personal future. It's the only explanation.'

'You mean you in the future?' It took Jamie a moment to understand what the Doctor was getting at. 'So why doesn't the future-you

remember us now being in this museum?'

Pausing for a moment, the Doctor looked up at Jamie. His jovial

expression had gone, replaced with an intense seriousness, as if he was trying to hang on to a thought about to disappear.

'He will, now that time has re-adjusted and re-aligned itself. Too late, of course. My future self wouldn't have known while our two

timestreams were in a state of flux on this planet. It will come back in a big rush to him, as the new memories flood back. I'd say he's in for one big headache.'

Jamie shook his head. 'What about the changing histories? And

Soji?' But it was the Doctor's turn to be confused now. He looked back at his young companion, baffled.

'But Jamie, all we've done is visit this museum. This planet only has one history, as we've seen evidenced here. So I'm not sure who or what you're talking about.' The Doctor paused, reflecting on the

enormity of the situation. 'My future self has played an integral role in Atkya's past. And to mess about with my personal timestream would be like playing with fire. You can get scorched or scar yourself for eternity.'

Jamie was about to protest but was interrupted by the Doctor. 'As much as I want to help the Atkyans, I can't,' the Doctor implored. 'So please don't ask again. Obviously, I had quite an impact on this planet.

But there's nothing I can do – the Atkyans are a dead race.'

'Aye, Doctor, let's just go back to the TARDIS, then.' Jamie hated seeing his friend so down and it was the only thing he could think to do. But, for a moment, Jamie couldn't quite remember where they'd left it. Thinking quietly, a moment of clarity suddenly went through his head. The TARDIS was outside. Reflecting on the little android history lesson as they walked, Jamie realised they hadn't actually been in the museum very long. And what the Doctor said was probably right –

after all, he was the scientist. Probably best be off to more exciting adventures elsewhere.

But there was a nagging thought at the back of his mind. He couldn't help feeling he'd forgotten something. Something important.

Within the TARDIS, the Doctor was busy at the hexagonal control

panel. As he often was, thought Turlough. But was he actually doing anything or fussing about? They were merely a few minutes into their

journey, yet the Doctor seemed totally oblivious to their experiences on Atkya.

But almost at that thought, the Doctor cried out, obviously in

immense pain. His hands went to his temples and, his face straining crimson, he managed to cry, ‘Mind shock!’

Turlough raced around the console to support the Time Lord, hoping to catch him before he fell and physically injured himself

‘What is it, Doctor?’ Turlough urged, as he shuffled awkwardly,

taking his friend’s weight in his arms. ‘A psychic shock? Are we under attack?’ Straining to speak, the Doctor struggled, contorting his boyish face.

‘Atkya... I was there before.’

‘We were just there,’ Turlough pointed out, worried the Doctor was becoming delusional. ‘Boksil and Lujet... the renepscia syndrome...

remember?’

Half-dragging, half-lifting the Doctor to a corner of the console room, Turlough sat him down to see if he could get more sense. The Doctor started to breathe in and out more regularly, composing himself slightly. Staring across towards the time rotor, he absent-mindedly fidgeted with the celery stick on his lapel as he spoke.

‘Memories have suddenly come back to me, Turlough. One of my

former selves was on Atkya a thousand years in the future. We were in the past. And whatever our actions were, we were influencing the

planet’s future.’ Turlough had crossed paths with some of the Doctor’s other selves before. And he knew messing about with one’s own

personal timestream could be highly dangerous. But this situation was a little different.

The Doctor’s face displayed a firm intensity as he tried to access his new memories. ‘It’s like a wave from the ocean rushing into an empty river bed – new thoughts are in all sorts of places, like the water finding new paths and furrows as it travels along. The shock is like jumping into a bath of icy water.’ The Doctor shook his head slightly as he cleared away some of the nebulous thoughts in his mind.

‘Time is malleable to an extent,’ he said. ‘Now that we’ve left, time has crystallised. Atkya’s future will now go on, as a result our actions.’

Turlough thought the Doctor had recovered enough to perhaps stand again, so he started to help the Doctor back on his feet. But he was a
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little puzzled. The Doctor sounded dejected.

‘But surely that’s a good thing? We helped the Atkyan race to

survive – otherwise they would have been wiped out.’

Moving under his own motion now, the Doctor started examining

the console. He looked up at Turlough and said, matter-of-factly: ‘Our cure and the subsequent stabiliser caused each Atkyan generation to have a lifespan that was much faster than before. Someone who was
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actually looked 80 and so on. So, ultimately, by the time my previous self got there they had bred themselves out of existence as their lifespans became shorter each time. The Atkyan race is extinct.’

For a moment, nothing was said between the two men. Turlough

couldn’t believe all their efforts had been for naught. Surely there was something more they could do?

‘Can’t we just go back and help again, Doctor? I don’t mean travel back in time; I mean arrive just a few days after we left or something?’

But even as he said the words, Turlough knew it would be fruitless. He knew the Doctor too well. And the desolation in the Doctor’s usual youthful face said it all.

‘I wish we could, Turlough, I really do. But time has crystallised in two points on Atkya now, thanks to there being two versions of myself at highly critical points in the vortex. This region of the galaxy is known for its temporal weakness and instability – as a Time Lord, I’m more aware of changes in the timestream than in other places and

Atkya was at a very fragile point. A return visit to around the time we left would be highly dangerous to the web of time, given those two time periods are now so intrinsically linked.’

Turlough’s gaze met the Doctor’s and indicated he understood. He

knew how dangerous playing with time could be. But something

needed to be said. The redhead composed himself before he spoke.

‘The Atkyans were dying anyway, Doctor. Take consolation in the

fact your cure may have prolonged their existence beyond what was expected before we arrived. The Atkyan history your previous self saw could have ended up very different.’

The Doctor thought for a moment and started to exit the console

room. ‘Yes,’ he reflected, more to himself. ‘It could have been very different indeed.’ As an afterthought, he added: ‘I think I need some aspirin.’

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They’d been waiting for more than an hour. The Doctor was still, presumably, talking to whichever poor MOD official had agreed to meet him – what a meeting that must be! Will, meanwhile, was dozing in his chair, ever so quietly snoring away.

Emily smiled to herself. The cold, dusty room made her remember her interview for the job – if you could call it an interview, the meeting she had with the top brass when she was drafted into UNIT as its political officer. She’d waved goodbye to a career in the media to become a soldier. A soldier! It still seemed amazing to her, where her life had taken her.

‘Don’t look so maudlin, Emily!’

The Doctor was standing in the doorway, a huge grin on his face.

‘It won’t be long, and then we can be off.’

‘Doctor,’ she said, stretching. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Shh. You’ll wake Will. Come here.’

The Doctor ushered Emily out into the corridor. Waiting for them was a man in his thirties. He was handsome and well dressed, and stuck out a hand.

‘Ronnie Tillyard,’ he said. ‘You must be Emily, my dear.’

She shook his hand, looking at the Doctor for explanations.

'Ronnie here works for the British government but is based in America – he's in London because, while digging around in some Washington records room, he discovered something. Something which, if found by the wrong sort of person, could be hugely damaging to world security. He's here on a mission to destroy all traces he can find in the MOD's archives too.'

'Quite,' said Ronnie. 'I know it sounds drastic, but we must purge the archives of all references and mentions of this...'

'Of what?' said Emily, fearing the worst.

'Well,' said the Doctor. 'Of me. It seems that some of my activities – my achievements, my tactics, you might say – have not gone unnoticed. And, if someone less moral than Ronnie stumbles across the records of what I've been up to... then they could use that information in some very disastrous ways.'

'I take it you've had even more adventures than the ones I've read about, Doctor.'

'Oh, Ronnie! You don't know the half of it!'

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Homework

Michael Coen

An adventure of the Second Doctor, with Jamie and Zoe

What I Did On My Summer Holidays By Norman Bean (Age 11)

This summer I had the most absolutely increddibile incredible

adventure of my life which I will now tell you about.

One evening I WENT to my bedroom. I am usually SENT to my

bedroom at night but I had been out playing football all day with my new Kevin Keegan football boots and I was quite tired, so I actually said 'Mum, I'm going to bed,' and she said 'Okay, see you tomorrow,'

and I went to my room to read my *Roy of the Rovers* comic which isn't as good as it used to be since Roy got married (which makes it quite boring).

Norman, this sentence is too long. Split it into shorter sentences.

I was reading my comic when SUDDENLY a strange man appeared

beside my bed. I could see him but I could also see through him, like a ghost. He didn't say anything, just stood there staring. I was really scared and ran downstairs to get my Mum. She came back up to my

room with me but when we got to my bedroom he was gone. So, of

course, Mum thought I was making it up and told me to stop being a baby (even though I was NOT crying).

My mum went back downstairs and, after a few minutes, the man

appeared again. This time I noticed that he looked a bit like my dad, only Dad wasn't in the house, he was working night-shift. I said 'Who are you?' He laffed laughed and said 'I am you. I am what you will become when you grow up, 30 years from now in the year 2008!!!!!!'

I was sure he was making it up because he didn't look like a man

from the future. He DID look a bit like my Dad but he was fatter and very scruffy, not at all like men from the future. He didn't have a spacesuit on or anything like that, just a T-shirt that said Duffy the Vampire or something.

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Norman, you haven't listened properly to the assignment. You were asked to write about something that actually happened to you during the summer holidays. This is not a creative writing exercise.

The man knew about all sorts of things that nobody else knows about, like where I hide my collection of football cards and private things like that, so I started to believe him. He told me how I could make myself very rich in the future by buying toys and not opening them and putting them in the cupboard and not playing with them. I told him that I didn't think that it sounded like a very good idea but he told me it was. I said to him that I didn't have enough pocket money to buy lots of toys, only enough for my *Roy of the Rovers* comic and for some football cards and anyway I don't really play with toys much any more because

they're for kids. He told me he knew of a way I could get lots of money to buy toys but before he could tell me he started to fade away.

That's when I knew he must be from the future, like on Star Trek or

something, because they can teleport. Anyway, I was going to run

downstairs and tell my mum all about this but then I thought about it and I decided that she probably STILL wouldn't believe me. So I

didn't tell anyone.

The next day as I was going to the park to play football (as usual!) when a strange man stopped to talk to me. He said he was a doctor and offered me some jelly babies. They looked as if they had been in his pocket for a looooooooong time. I didn't take any because you shouldn't take sweets from strangers and anyway he didn't look like a doctor. He was dressed like a tramp with a big furry coat tied at the waist with a bit of string and his hair was like the haircuts the Beatles used to have, not like a doctor's hair at all.

Ile asked me if anything strange had happened to me recently and if I had seen anything unusual like a ghost. Now, even though I had seen these things I decided not to tell him because you should never talk to strange men and then he tried to grab my arm so I kicked him on the shin and ran away.

Norman, you did the right thing. If you ever see this man again you must run away from him and tell your parents or another adult right away.

When I got to the flat bit of the park where we play football I told my friends about the (pretend!) doctor. Billy Stewart didn't believe me and called me a liar, but the others believed me. We went to find the park keeper, but when he took us back to look for the strange man we

couldn't find him. Billy Stewart called me a liar again and I got into a fight with him and I would have beaten him only he tripped me up. I just went home after that. I was a bit scared because I couldn't

understand how the doctor who looked like a tramp could have known about the man from the future. I was even more scared when the

ghostly man appeared in my room again that evening. He told me all about the toys I should buy but I didn't really understand because he said the toys were from films and when I said 'I haven't seen that film,' he would say 'That's because it hasn't been made yet.'

'Anyway,' I said to him 'I told you I don't have money to buy lots of

toys just to put them in my cupboard and not play with them.' And he said he knew where I could get money. He told me that my Nan had

LOTS of money hidden in a jar right at the back of one of the

cupboards in her kitchen and she was old and had forgotten about it and she wouldn't even spend it before she dies – WHICH WOULD BE

NEXT WEEK!!!

I told the ghost that he was a liar and that my Nan was not going to die, but he said he was from the future and he knew about these things.

He said that after she died my Dad would find the money when he

cleaned her home but if I took the money from my Nan's before she died then no one would know. My Nan wouldn't even notice it was

missing and I could keep all of it

I told him that stealing was wrong and to stop coming to my

bedroom and telling me these things. The man started to fade away again but, as he was fading, he shouted 'Remember what I said,' but because he was fading it wasn't very loud and my mum didn't hear

him.

Next morning when I woke up I decided to go to visit my Nan. I was NOT going to steal her money but I thought if I looked at the back of the cupboard in the kitchen and found the jar with the money in it then I would know if he was really from the future or not

I'm glad you know that it is wrong to steal Norman but I'm afraid I find this story quite distasteful. I'm going to have to send a letter home to your mother!

When I got to my Nan's house a very beautiful lady was sitting outside on the step. She was wearing a suit that looked like it was made out of silver foil and she had a friendly smile. 'Hello. My name is Zoe,' she said, and I said 'Hello'. 'Have you come to see your Nan?' she asked and I said that I had.

She asked me if I loved my Nan and I said 'YES'. And then she

asked me if I would do anything that would hurt her and I said 'NO'.

And then she asked if I would do something that would hurt my Nan even if my Nan didn't know about it and even if no one else knew

about it. I thought for a minute and told her that I guess that would be 159

wrong, even if my Nan didn't know about it and even if no one ever found out. 'That's right' said the lady. 'Now go in and visit your Nan, she'll be glad to see you.'

The lady walked away from my Nan's house and walked over to a

man who was wearing a KILT (that's right– a Scotch man like Hot

Shot Hamish in the *Scorcher* comic). Then they both waved at me and walked away. I waved back and went in to see my Nan.

My Nan was very old but she would always have some sweets for

me and she would give me some pocket money when I went to see her.

Sometimes she would tell me funny stories about when my Dad and

Uncle Jim were young and the stupid things that they used to do, and that would make me laugh. My Nan was really great and I'm sad now that I can't see her any more.

That night the man came to see me again. He asked if I had got the money and I said 'NO. I won't do it.' He asked me why not and I told him that I loved my Nan and it was wrong and anyway I didn't want lots of toys that you never played with and they were for babies

anyway.

He got really angry and started to shout at me. He said I was stupid and this was HIS big chance to make some money. As he got loude1

and louder he seemed to become more and more solid until I couldn't sec through him anymore. He was swinging his arms around and one

of them knocked over the cup on my shelf that we won at the end of last year for the District Under-12s Football Championship. He looked at it and started to laff laugh. He was standing right in front of me now and I was getting very, very scared.

'I'm here!' he shouted. 'I can travel back and forth!' He looked at me

with a really mean look on his face. ‘I don’t need you,’ he said. ‘I can do it all by myself.’ He pushed passed me and pulled open my

bedroom door. But he couldn’t go into the hall because blocking his way were the doctor who looked like a tramp, the beautiful lady called Zoe and the Scotch man!!!!!!!!!

‘Your game is up’ said the doctor. ‘I’ve closed the time-rift you found and you are going on a one-way trip back to 2008.’ They pushed the man back into my room and the Scotch man held him while the

doctor shouted at him.

‘But really, is this the best you could do?’ said the doctor. ‘You have the opportunity to travel back to the past and your tiny imagination only stretches far enough to try to terrify this poor boy into buying some useless trinkets!’

‘Jamie,’ the Doctor said to the Scotch man. ‘Take him to the

Tarvest’. With that, the Scotch man in the kilt took Mr Smelly out of my room and downstairs.

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Then the beautiful lady called Zoe turned to me and told me that I was a good boy and that I obviously knew what things were important.

And then she crouched down and whispered in my ear. ‘You won’t

ever forget what’s important, will you Norman? Promise me.’ I

promised her I wouldn’t. Then the man who said he was a doctor said

‘Come on, Zoe. We have to go.’

I watched them from the top of the stairs as they went down. My

mum was standing by the front door, really still, like a statue. When the doctor passed her he waved his hand in front of her and she opened the door for them and then closed it behind them.

I ran downstairs to my Mum and gave her a big hug and started to

tell her everything that had happened BUT SHE STILL DIDN’T

BELIEVE ME. I said ‘But you saw the doctor and Zoe leaving the

house.’ But she said ‘It was just a salesman at the door. I sent him packing.’ I don’t know why she couldn’t remember them. I think

perhaps the doctor hypnotised her or used some mind control or

something.

Anyway I kept telling her about everything that had happened but

when I got to the bit about Nan dying she started to cry and told me to be quiet. Then she said I was a nasty boy for making up such hurtful stories. She told me not to tell my Dad because he would get very angry. Then she sent me to my room.

I was very angry in my room because No one WOULD BELIEVE

ME. I decided I was never, ever going to tell my family or my friends any of my secrets ever again. Never ever.

Two weeks later, on a Saturday morning, Mum took me to see my

Nan but my Mum couldn’t wake her up because she had died. My

mum said she had just slipped away in her sleep. I had to go to the funeral and get a new black coat for it.

After the funeral my Mum said I should never, ever tell my Dad

about the dream I had. I told her it wasn’t a dream but she still WON’T

BELIEVE ME.

I’m sorry, Norman. I didn’t realise that your grandmother had died during the holidays. I’m not angry with you but I think I will still write to your mother to arrange a little chat with her.

I think about what happened quite a lot now and don’t really go out to play football so much any more. Instead I go to the library quite a lot and get out books about spacemen and the future and things like that.

That’s what I like now.

I also think quite a lot about what the lady called Zoe said. Even though I said I understood what she meant I get confused when I think

about it. I think she might have meant about how my Nan was

important and stuff like that. But my Nan's gone now so I'm not really sure.

I think that the lady might have been from the future because she had a very shiny suit, so maybe when I get older (in the FUTURE!) I'll understand what she meant. Maybe in the future I'll understand what's important.

The Devil Like a Bear

Brian Willis

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor, with Ace

... in our Hundred in Essex, 29 were condemned at once and 4 brought 25 miles to be hanged at where their Discoverer lives, this for sending the Devil like a Bear to kill him.

Matthew Hopkins, report on the Chelmsford witch trials, 1645

She moved weeping through the forest, and her tears turned the woods to flame.

Although she could no longer hear her pursuers, she knew they could not be far behind her; the wall of flame she had cast around herself would not delay them for long. Then the pain would begin once more, and the nights barren of sleep, and the endless questions. Under such an onslaught, she knew, even her capacity for summoning fire would desert her. It was already beginning to feel more of an effort.

Her knees buckled beneath her at the futility of it all. Why was she running? All they had to do was sit outside the fire, bide their time, wait for her to exhaust herself. By morning it would be safe for them to cross the scorched woodland and simply pick he1 up.

Mr Stearne was a learned man. Surely he already knew her

limitations. Several times during her interrogation she had received the distinct impression that he knew full well what she was, what she was capable of, and that all the torment he put her through was naught but flummery and theatre.

She looked at her hands. Her fingers had stretched even further, the skin taut around the knuckles, on the verge of splitting. The nails –

those that remained – were black and rotting, being displaced by

something growing through from underneath. The pain was intense, as intense as the pain inflicted upon her by her tormentors. With these fingers, she explored the body beneath the rough sacking dress they had put upon her, and found each distortion of her form just that little more pronounced.

Turning tear-blurred eyes toward the sky, she watched sparks from 163

the burning vegetation around her drift heavenward, feeling an

inexplicable envy for them as they merged into the stars.

I am no witch, she told herself. *I do not suckle demons*.

I am a demon.

Her sobs turned into a howl of rage. A howl echoed by the ash-

stained stars.

'How long is this going to take, Professor?'

Ace was sitting in the TARDIS doorway, listlessly thumbing at a

hand-held game console. The game she was playing – it involved

riding dragons over a mountainous landscape, fighting other dragons, outwitting wizards, and carving up zombies – was considered state-of-the-art on Earth in 2010 (their most recent sojourn), but by now she had seen so many of these games that she played them more from habit than because they provided her with any enjoyment, or challenge. The Doctor was always promising to take her to the game worlds of

Trelefanous, where it was almost impossible to tell the difference between the actual inhabitants and the holographic avatars they sent out to play the intricate and complex scenarios devised by the planet's rulers, the Ludarchs; but something always prevented him. Something with big guns and an inflated sense of cosmic purpose, usually:

something that needed its tentacles slapped by the Doctor. If nothing

else, Ace mused ruefully, travelling in the TARDIS had changed her conceptions of boredom.

'Professor?' His lack of response made her crane her neck to look into the TARDIS's illuminated interior. 'Did you hear me? I said–'

The howl rippled out of the darkness and stroked at the hairs on the nape of her neck. Switching off the game, she stood, at last paying her surroundings the attention she had been denying them. In truth, she hadn't much cared about the precise details of where, and when, the TARDIS had washed up. She'd asked, but all the Doctor would say

was 'Earth'. Considering that the repai1 work he was undertaking

involved an overhaul of the main console displays, it was entirely possible he didn't know. But now Ace cared quite a bit. Or rather, she cared to the extent that wherever or *when* ever it was, she didn't ever want to come here again. And that howl... it really didn't sound like anything that belonged on Earth.

For the first time she saw the glow in the sky above the trees. There were other sounds, too; the sound of voices, raised in alarm or anger.

Horses. The crackle of burning foliage.

'Quite close.'

The sound of the Doctor's voice at her shoulder made her start. He was looking out towards the conflagration intently, still jacketless, his 164

shirtsleeves and threadbare pullove1 smeared with dirt.

'What do you think is going on, Professor? Sounds bad.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'A little local problem. Nothing to do with us.

We should be on our way.'

Ace turned to him, incredulous. He flicked a glance at her, and she saw the twinkle of mischief in his eyes. 'Yeah, right,' she said. Within moments he was slinging his beige jacket over his shoulders, donning his hat, and pointing his umbrella in the direction of the glow.

'Come on. We'll be late for the party.'

'What about the TARDIS?' she asked. 'You haven't finished...'

‘Oh, yes, I have,’ he responded, pulling the door of the police box shut behind him. ‘Finished ages ago. Been having a little snooze. But I’m a very light sleeper, particularly when what wakes me is...

something familiar.’

‘Familiar?’ Ace didn’t like the Doctor’s intonation when he said that word.

But he simply shrugged again, producing a small torch from his

pocket. ‘I could be wrong. Difficult as it is to believe, Ace, I

sometimes am, you know.’

As she trailed along in his wake, she reflected that she thought he was going to say and I hope I am.’

It didn’t take them long to locate the source of the glow. They could see the wall of flame extending for hundreds of feet in a semi-circle, of which, Ace noted with some relief, they were on the outside. ‘This is no ordinary forest fire,’ said the Doctor above the crackle of the conflagration. ‘It looks more like a fire wall...’

‘Deliberately set, you mean? Why?’

‘For the usual reason, I suppose. Protection. But protecting who?

And from what?’

Ace was about to respond when they heard voices, close, getting

closer. The Doctor grabbed her arm and dragged her into the darkness, signalling her to crouch in the undergrowth. Within moments, a group of some half a dozen men appeared, clad in rough-woven shirts, tunics and leather boots. They clutched a motley selection of agricultural implements, with one or two, Ace noted with some amusement,

holding high the obligatory blazing torch. They seemed to be searching for a gap in the fire wall. Their excited babbling – in a thick dialect –

betrayed men in a state of intense anxiety.

‘She can’t hide from us for ever! We should wait...’

‘And take the chance that she’ll just grow stronger? S’blood, Will, are you mad?’

‘Ned’s right,’ said a third voice. ‘The little sow’s becoming more 165

demon every day. You heard what Mr Stearne said. And look what she did to her poor dad...’

From the other side of the flames, another howl erupted, and each man flinched, fell silent. But simultaneously, the fire wall flickered, and diminished to a broken line of glowing embers.

The men looked at each other nervously for a moment, as though

expecting their quarry to leap at them from the darkness, but then found their resolve and crossed the line of scorched vegetation. The Doctor waited until their torches were distant bobbing points of light before he stood, pulling Ace to her feet.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We have to find the girl they’re looking for before they do.’

‘You know what’s going on, don’t you?’

In the light of the Doctor’s torch, his face was grave. ‘I’ve got a pretty shrewd idea. I recognise that howl, you see... no matter where they turn up, what species they corrupt, that sound... it’s always the same. Always.’

Without pause fo1 further explanation, he set off in the direction from which the sound had come.

‘Of all the places to turn up, it had to be here, didn’t it?’

She wasn’t sure if he was talking to her, or to himself. ‘Professor?’

‘England, mid 1640s if I’m correct in my estimation. Somewhere in the eastern counties. Have you ever heard of Matthew Hopkins? The self-appointed “witchfinder general”?’

The title struck a chord. ‘There was an old Vincent Price movie... oh, and we did some stuff on the witch hunts in history, at school.’

‘He had an assistant by the name of John Stearne. That was probably the chap those villagers mentioned. Even more brutal than his boss.

They tortured and executed hundreds of innocent women, all in the name of “Christianity”. Go into a village, whip up a bit of hysteria, get a few unpopular local females accused of witchcraft, extract a

confession under torture, get them hanged and walk away having been suitably rewarded for their trouble.' He paused, rage bubbling just beneath the surface. 'Of all the places...'

'Professor... what exactly has "turned up" here?'

He turned, and seemed about to answer when another howl... closer, but to Ace's ears more plaintive than before... sounded across the forest. 'This way!' He plunged into the darkness. 'Quickly, Ace!'

She ran after him, following the firefly trail of the Doctor's torch, and marvelling at her little friend's remarkable turn of speed when the occasion demanded. They crashed through the forest until finally

emerging in a clearing. Above them the stars gleamed, clear and placid.

'Ace...' breathed the Doctor. There...'

He shone his torch at a point some ten yards or so ahead of them. A ragged heap of clothes moved, their inhabitant for the moment

invisible, but the pain in every movement all too apparent. He gestured Ace to silence and began to approach.

The figure had sensed them, that much was obvious. Every so often a patch of bracken would ignite weakly in the Doctor's path – it was like watching a tired old guard dog feebly trying to bite at an intruder.

'Can you understand me?' the Doctor said, softly. 'We're friends.

We're not going to hurt you.'

The figure tried to howl once more, but the sound came out as little more than a heartbreaking whine. It stopped. There was stillness, and utter silence.

A silence broken from the other side of the glade by the sudden

arrival of the men they'd seen earlier. Their low chatter ceased the instant they took in the scene.

'There she is!'

'Who's that?' A brand was raised higher, as they tried to pick out the

faces of the newcomers.

‘Don’t recognise them. Who are you? What are you doing...’

The Doctor reached into his pocket and produced something which

he lobbed into the grass a few metres ahead of him, on the other side of the prone figure. Instantly, the glowing figure of a giant insect shimmered into existence, forelegs clawing at the air, mandibles

snapping.

‘Behold!’ declaimed the Doctor. ‘I am the wizard Quiquaequod!

This creature is under my protection! Go, or meet your doom!’

The men needed little more in the way of encouragement. They

turned and ran, shrieking with terror, back the way they had come. A moment later the insect figure wavered and vanished.

‘What the hell was that?’

‘Brontiliac holo-projector. Child’s toy. Only a few seconds of power in the battery though, so if they weren’t immediately spooked, we’d have been in trouble.’ He smiled. ‘Sometimes fear and superstition can work in our favour. Now...’ His expression became serious once more.

‘Let’s see exactly who it is that’s “under my protection”, eh?’

They moved closer to the figure on the ground. Having handed the

torch to Ace, the Doctor crouched, reached out and touched it,

tentatively at first, then taking firm hold and tugging. Without protest, the figure slumped onto its back.

A face was revealed. Although the skin around the cheekbones had

split, and something appeared to have distorted the line of the jaw, it was all too recognisably a human face.

‘A girl...’ breathed Ace.

‘About your age too, I’d say. Maybe even younger.’ He pulled aside the

sacking dress, revealing further distortions to the body. The chest and rib cage seemed to be expanding outward, as if to make room for greater lung capacity, and the skin was developing a thick protective hide in parts. What was equally disturbing were the various marks –

burns, bruises, and the tell-tale signs of needles inserted into the skin –

which could only have been produced by human action.

'They already got to her. The witch hunters.'

'Yes, but she got away somehow.' He stood, turned his back on

them and appeared to fall deep in thought.

'Professor?'

'Maybe she shouldn't have.' His voice was low, uncertain, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was saying. Ace certainly couldn't. She rose, and swung him around by the shoulder.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'The Skreeth. That's what I'm talking about.'

'The what? Professor...'

'You haven't seen them, Ace. I have. I've also seen what some

people out there –' he gestured at the heavens '– will do to stop them coming back.'

'You're making no sense. What's all that got to do with her?'

So he told her.

No one had ever been quite able to pinpoint the planet of origin of the Skreeth. Not even the Time Lords. Most of the worlds they had

swarmed upon were no longer able to communicate, so a definitive

'genealogy' was difficult to establish. They had emerged millennia before, almost simultaneously on a dozen or so systems on the edge of the galaxy. Whole worlds had fallen prey to the infestation,

civilisations toppled overnight as millions were transformed into beasts. Word got to the main hub of the Federation that a plague of

‘fire-breathing monsters’ had taken hold in the outlying regions, and was set to infect the rest. Panic, of course, was the natural

consequence.

The Time Lords stepped in at this point. Reluctant as they were to intervene in the affairs of other races, they saw that the chaos being wrought by this plague would eventually affect even them, and so they despatched an errant member of their order–the one known as the

Doctor – to investigate and act accordingly.

He went to the planet Hysperikos Prime, a world he had visited

many times to sit in its great citadels of learning and speak with some of the finest minds that one single, isolated race – aside, of course, 168

from his beloved Humans – had contributed to the cosmos. He found it a charred and broken waste, its population either dead or transformed into mindless creatures intent on the destruction of all other living beings. He could not stay on the planet’s surface for long, so he took the TARDIS into orbit around it, tried to make contact with any

remnant of Hysperikos’s original population that may have survived.

All he heard over the TARDIS communication system was the

sound of a whole planet howling into the dark. The translation matrix, surprisingly, turned some of the cacophony into recognisable words and phrases. He had heard much about the destiny of this race – they had no name for themselves; why bother with a name when you are all that matters in this universe? – to sweep aside all other life, which in their collective eye was a foulness, the true infestation. Each individual creature was effectively mindless, but as a race, they had a kind of rudimentary intelligence, each one linked to the rest across the universe on the quantum level.

They spread by means of spores, sent across the void of space. When they found a hospitable planet, and most did not, they would infect the inhabitants of that world with a viral form of DNA that would

overwrite the host genome and turn it into the pyrokinetic predator that was the next stage of its life cycle, purging the world and turning into a

‘nursery’ for more spores. And so it went on.

The Doctor left Hysperikos and reported back to the Time Lords. He was ordered to broker an alliance between some of the more influential races outside of the bureaucratic entanglements of the Federation.

Haste was urged, and the Federation High Council was not noted for its haste. He approached the Draconians first, as several of their more remote colonies had already been lost to the ‘Skreeth’ – a Draconian word which soon become common parlance for the threat; its closest human approximation is ‘foulness’.

This was a mistake. As soon as the Draconians were made aware of

the true nature of the Skreeth, they embarked on a ‘Scorched Galaxy’

policy, wiping out hundreds of planets – many not even in their

jurisdiction – where the Skreeth had been detected, and several where it had not. Thus many local interplanetary quarrels were settled – all it required was for someone to mention to the Draconians that a Skreeth had been detected on such-and-such a world, and they would go in, to

‘disinfect’.

It worked, of course. Within a generation the Skreeth had been

pushed out of the main population centres and into the fringes of the galaxy. But the Draconians still watched for any sign that they were returning, and occasionally a planet would fall prey to some

unexplained ‘catastrophe’, whereupon they would deny their

involvement categorically and maintain thereafter a steadfast silence.

And the Doctor? He never spoke of it. Not unless he had to.

With a shudder, the Doctor concluded his story and looked down at the girl on the ground at their side. Ace could tell that he was still hearing the voice of the Skreeth, howling its hatred at him from a billion throats at once.

However, she was not in the mood for understanding.

‘You want to leave her to them? Let them torture and kill her?’

‘What I *want* is irrelevant, Ace...’ He turned away from her.

‘But that’s what you’re going to do, isn’t it?’

The Doctor rounded on her. ‘I’ve seen what both the Skreeth and the Draconians are capable of, Ace. Is it so incomprehensible to you that I... that sometimes you have to sacrifice one for the greater good?’

‘You’re the Doctor! Even the Daleks are afraid of you!’ Her voice softened, trembled slightly. ‘And I believe in you. There’s a way.’

‘There are limits...’ He seemed on the verge of tears. She reached out and took his hands. He carried on speaking, almost oblivious to her, his eyes still on the girl at their feet.

‘All our actions have consequences, don’t they? Most of the time I don’t get to see them, I just disappear and leave it to others to clean up the mess. But this time... this time I can’t avoid the consequences of my own mistake. If I hadn’t gone to the Draconians when I did, hadn’t trusted them with what I knew about the Skreeth, hadn’t been so stupid as to believe they’d act rationally instead of with simple blind panic...’

‘You weren’t to know.’

‘No. Well, that’s what I tell myself, sometimes. And sometimes it’s enough to allow me to sleep. But all those worlds “disinfected” by the Draconians, do you think it’s enough to blot out their screams?’

‘Maybe not’ Ace’s voice was harsh, no longer from anger, but to try and draw the Doctor from his introspection. ‘But you dragged me out from under the weight of my past, Professor. Showed me that there was a way out. You have to go on. You have to find a way. What’s the

alternative?’

He looked at her for a moment, as though seeing her for the first time in minutes. Then his elfin face creased into a smile. Not a

particularly convincing one, but a smile nonetheless.

‘All right...’ He took a deep breath. ‘First thing to do, is get this young lady back to the TARDIS.’

They stooped to try and lift her from the ground, but their attempts

only elicited another whine of agony.

‘Well, strike that,’ The Doctor said. ‘Seems like I’ll have to bring the TARDIS here.’ He rummaged once more in his capacious jacket

pockets, and came up with a small spherical object which he pressed into Ace’s hand.

‘Tracking device,’ he explained. ‘I’m still none too sure of the

coordinates, and the old girl is temperamental about navigation at the best of times, so this will help me locate you. Stay here with her. Don’t move. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

‘Gotcha.’ But he was already gone, swallowed up into the darkness.

‘You could have left a torch though...’

She didn’t have the remotest idea in what season of the year–

whichever year it was – they had arrived but Ace only realised how cold the night was when the Doctor was out of sight. Without thought, she huddled down beside the shape on the ground, trying to find

warmth. As she did so, the girl stirred.

‘Who are you?’ said a frail voice.

‘My name’s Ace. My friend... the one who just left... he’s the

Doctor.’

‘Doctor?’ She paused, apparently puzzled. ‘I’m not sick.’

‘No, he’s not... I mean, you’re not really...’

‘I’m a demon. God is punishing me.’

‘That’s not true!’ Ace squinted into the dark, trying to catch sight of the girl’s face. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Tilly Brewer... that is, Matilda. Are you with Mr Stearne?’

‘No. We’re here to help you, Tilly.’

A deep sigh, laced with pain. ‘You can’t help me. No one can.’ She

paused again. ‘I killed my father.’

Ace remembered the words of her pursuers. ‘Tilly...’

‘He tried to beat the demon out of me. So I killed him. I didn’t mean to... but the devil took hold of me. He burned. Screamed and screamed and...’

‘We’ll help you, Tilly. We’ll take you where you’ll be safe.’

She said nothing, simply turned her back against Ace. Ace was about to say something more, but at that moment a movement in the bracken, still some distance away, caught her attention. A voice, and another; people approaching. Obviously the pursuers terror had been short-lived; perhaps they had returned in greater number.

There was little choice now but to ignore the Doctor’s orders, and trust that he would be able to home in on the tracking device quickly enough. Scooping Tilly up under the shoulders, she lifted her, finding her a surprising weight. The girl groaned in pain, but made no attempt to resist. With one arm over her now shoulders, Ace set off into the dark woods, in a direction precisely opposite to the one from which the voices emanated.

How long they travelled – directionless, silent except for Tilly’s 171

occasional whimper – Ace had no idea. Now and then, she saw lights through the trees, the glow of firebrands, and she steered a course away from them. Her back protested with twinges of sharp pain under Tilly’s dead weight, but she struggled on.

Then they emerged once more into open ground. A barn – from its

dilapidated state, derelict for some time – loomed before them.

Exposed as it was, Ace thought, at least they would be able to see their pursuers approaching, instead of possibly stumbling into them in the dark.

And the Doctor would be here soon. Of course.

She hauled the by-now unconscious Tilly through the doors, let her slip to the floor, and closed them behind her. Pressing her eye to a gap in the wood, she peered out at the line of trees.

Minutes later, to Ace’s dismay, a host of torch-bearing figures

emerged from the woods, their eyes scanning the earth. One of them at last looked up, pointed at the barn and yelled. Their pace quickened, in their direction.

'Any time you're ready, Professor,' Ace muttered.

As they got closer, she could see two figures on horseback among

the throng. One rode a carthorse, all the time bellowing at those around him. He appeared to be quoting scripture. The other...

Well, well, thought Ace, as the second man, attired in crow black and with a wide-brimmed hat on his head, silently urged his horse closer; you may not look exactly like Vincent Price, but there's no mistaking *you*.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Mr Matthew Hopkins. The

Witchfinder General.'

Evidently Stearne (the other mounted figure, it was clear) had

decided he needed a little help on this one and called in his boss.

Hopkins brought his horse to a halt some twenty yards from the barn, motioning the others to stop also. After a moment or two of reflection, he dismounted and approached the barn a little nearer.

'Witch!' he called, in a voice honed to stentorian perfection. 'Do you hear me? Do you hear my words, Matilda Brewer?'

Ace bit back the urge to shout 'bog off' back at him.

'The fate of your eternal soul rests with you in this hour! It has been proved to all present that you are a witch, there needs be no further debate upon this matter.'

The mob grumbled its agreement.

'All that remains to be decided is your punishment, before Almighty God. If you surrender yourself now, and show true repentance, your end shall be swift as ordained by law. If you resist...'

Ace swore she saw Hopkins smile. It was obvious which option he

preferred.

'... then you will face all the torments of the mortal flesh, before you are sent to the fires of damnation!'

This was grandstanding, nothing more than giving the yokels a good show for the money they were probably paying. And they appreciated it well enough; their assent this time was more of a cheer. Ace kept her peace; suddenly she found herself wishing she'd had the presence of mind to bring some of her trusty Nitro-9 with her. Then they'd see a show.

Something behind her made her turn. Tilly had regained

consciousness and raised herself to her feet, and now stood with her back to Ace, shoulders rising and filling as she took great gulps of air.

'Tilly...'

The figure turned, but there was little even recognisably human left in its features, let alone anything of Tilly Brewer. Its body mass appeared to have doubled. The lower part of the skull was pushing outwards into a vicious muzzle as Ace watched, the skin around the jaw stretching and ripping. Fingers had distended into claws, and the eyes now blazed with alien hatred.

'Sleepy-time's over then...' She hurled herself sideways as flame erupted from the door beside her. From the look of the creature's eyes, it was having difficulty focusing, identifying its target. This situation wouldn't last long.

All the time crying out Tilly's name, appealing to a humanity that seemed, at the very least, hopelessly submerged, Ace zig-zagged across the open space of the barn interior. Fire gouted from the walls, the hay, the floor, as the Skreeth tried to eradicate its enemy, howling and raging as it did so.

From outside came Hopkin's shout of triumph. 'God's will! He

purges the demon with holy fire!'

The voice distracted the Skreeth's attention. It turned and leapt at the smouldering barn doors, shattering them and sending arrow-sharp

splinters spraying across the assembled mob. Ace heard their wail of terror, followed by Stearne's curses as he tried to prevent them from

fleeing.

The Skreeth was silhouetted in the doorway now. Its form was still shifting, still veering away from the human, but the initial pain of the transformation had apparently gone; the sounds coming from the

beast's throat had a disturbing air of savage joy about them.

Goodbye, Tilly. Wherever you are.

Beyond the Skreeth, Ace could make out Hopkins, kneeling in its

path, transfixed and muttering urgent prayers. All the rest, including Stearne, had broken and were running for their lives. The Witchfinder

General was alone, facing death at the hands of a 'demon', and a small voice in Ace's mind hoped he was, at last, doubting his place in

heaven.

The Skreeth poised itself to leap. Hopkins closed his eyes, his lips mouthing a final 'amen'.

'Tilly!' Ace's shout surprised even herself. A moment before she'd have been happy to see that scumbag Hopkins chewed up and spat out.

But she'd travelled too long with the Doctor.

The beast turned. Through the smoke of the burning barn – which,

she noted, was beginning to disintegrate around her– she saw in its huge eyes one momentary glimmer of the girl she had spoken to, all too briefly. And all too briefly, Tilly was gone again. The Skreeth recalled its unfinished business with her, and with a howl more furious than any before, it sprang for her.

Sorry, Professor.

As she lurched backwards and fell, the howl of the Skreeth was

replaced by a different, more familiar, sound. Blue-painted wood

interposed itself between her and the creature.

How long Ace lay on the floor looking up at the TARDIS before her wits returned to her, she didn't know. It was a crashing piece of

smouldering timber that brought her back, and for a moment she

waited for the Skreeth to emerge from behind the TARDIS and finish her off. When it didn't, two things occurred to her.

One, the barn was about to collapse around her.

Two, the Skreeth was inside the TARDIS. With the Doctor.

Hammering on the door with both hands, she cried out for him to let her in. It wasn't clear just which was uppermost in her mind, her own safety or the Doctor's, but when the door swung open a few moments later, and she fell inside, into her friend's arms, she didn't care.

He hugged her, calmed her, and shushed her to silence. Then he

pointed to an unconscious form on the floor of the console room. As he sent the TARDIS spinning into the Vortex, Are bent to examine the girl. The 'monster' had receded, and, apart from the damage done to her flesh and bones by the process, she seemed – relatively at least –

human once more.

'She's safe in here,' the Doctor explained. 'The final stage of the mutation hadn't taken hold. The TARDIS is screening her from the

quantum link with the rest of the Skreeth race which was pushing her towards the edge. Separated from the 1est, each individual is

harmless.'

She got up and put her arms around him. 'I knew you'd come

through for her, Professor. For *me*.'

'It was a bit touch and go, I must admit. Materialising around an 174

object – particularly a *living* one – is a risky business.'

'What? You're not telling me that was *deliberate*?'

'Well, of course!' He paused to chew on a hangnail. 'Brilliant

navigation, I'd say. Only trouble was, having locked on to the tracking device, I expected to materialise around the both of you. Got the fright of my life when our friend appeared, all claws and teeth... if the severing of her link to the Skreeth hadn't immediately knocked her

out cold, things could have got a little... messy.'

Ace looked down at Tilly. Her breathing seemed shallow, but steady.

'So what do we do with her? Where does she go? Can she go home?'

'No. Her witchfinder chums would assure her a warm welcome, that

much is certain. As it is, they'll probably find some other poor female to blame for their misfortune. And besides, Ace, you're forgetting one thing...'

'What?'

His face was a mask, empty of emotion. 'I told you. She's safe in *here*...'

There was a breeze blowing across the meadow. From where, and to

where, wasn't clear. The Doctor had made it very clear that not even he knew the answer to everything. Not here, at any rate...

The afternoon had been very pleasant. Tilly had cooked for them;

since she had learned to read, and the Doctor had lent her several of his favourite cookery books, she had shown some talent in the culinary arts. Of course, her reading tastes were broader than that –

unsurprisingly, under the Doctor's tutelage. Their ostensible purpose today had been to drop off some more books, Dickens mainly, which he thought she might enjoy; she had also asked if she could hang on to his precious signed copy of the complete works of Lewis Carroll for a while longer. Ace had played tennis with her for a while, until her still poorly functioning joints forced her to rest.

They stood on a small rise, watching Tilly go back into her cottage.

'Do you think she's lonely, Professor?' asked Ace.

'Possibly. She always seems extremely glad to see us. But she was lonely before. And the prospect of pain has diminished somewhat.'

'I don't see why...' The Doctor was already shaking his head, in

morose anticipation of Ace's question. 'I don't see why she can't be with us. As a regular passenger on the TARDIS. Why the deceit? Why not tell her where she 1eally is?'

‘I told you, Ace. She wouldn’t understand. It would be too much of a wrench for her. One day, perhaps... but even then she wouldn’t be able to come with us if we walked out beyond the main doors. Do you

really think that’s fair on her?’

‘So, it’s this –’ she gestured around her ‘– or nothing. What a life.’

‘It’s not so bad,’ the Doctor replied emphatically. ‘It’s peaceful. She has everything she needs. And she has us to visit her.’

‘So it’s a gilded cage. Whoopee. She doesn’t even know where she

is...’

‘She’s safe.’ He put his hat on, signalling an end to the conversation.

‘That’s all she needs to know, for now.’ He walked past her without a glance.

‘Professor...’

He turned.

‘Will she ever be free, do you think?’

He looked back at the cottage. ‘If you want a narrow definition of freedom, Ace, she already is.’ He held up a hand to head off her

protests. ‘But I know what you’re asking. And the simple answer is, I don’t know. Maybe one day someone will find a way of stripping the Skreeth infection from every cell in her body. I hope so. I promise you, I won’t stop looking for a way.’ He headed away from her again.

‘What about you, Professor? Will you ever be free?’

The Doctor didn’t answer. Ace waited for a moment more, looking

down at the cottage, before following him through the concealed

doorway and back into the roundelled, labyrinthine corridors of the TARDIS. He was already far ahead of her; for a moment she felt

forgotten.

Then she heard him call, and she softly closed the door behind her, and ran towards the sound of his voice.

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Stanley

Lizzie Hopley

An adventure of the Fourth Doctor, with Leela

Stanley stared out at the child as it mouthed stupid baby-human words at him through the glass. He focused like a laser on the neat, cerebral cortex hidden within the mop of yellow curls.

Die, human. Freeze up your lungs and stop off your oesophagus like you do when you dry-drown. Land heavy like a dead pike on concrete and make your mother scream.

The child crammed a large piece of peanut brittle into its gaping mouth, still looking at him with soft-boiled-egg eyes. Stanley could hear the salivating crunch of teeth on toffee. Well, no, he couldn't but he could imagine – like the imploding trump of the universe before everything simple and pure was befouled. If Stanley could have sighed, he would. Loudly and wearily with all of his 4000 years.

He reached out further to the pathways and cages and streets beyond, imagining this time the crashes of cars, the twisting of limbs and the gnashing of teeth. His great eyes rolled slowly upwards in his head.

Boredom was ever so tough to beat – it was like algae, wet and

clammy and slow to spread. But, when it took a hold, it stuck like glue to every surface of your being, blocked out the light, sucked out the oxygen, closed over your soul.

Did Stanley have a soul? A muscle contracted somewhere along his

backbone – it might have been laughter once – puns always amused

him.

'The wonderful thing about this area of London,' said the Doctor, 'is that no one ever bats an eyelid at a police box.'

He dropped the key into his voluminous pocket and turned to face

Prince Albert Road. It was utterly empty.

‘Leela?’

He had been planning to put her at ease. He had let her spend two whole hours in the TARDIS trying on every outfit she could find in order not to attract the usual attention. Leela didn’t like being stared at.

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The Doctor didn’t like Leda being stared at– people usually got

injured. But in twenty-first-century London, you could wear sackcloth and ashes and feel more at home than when they were actually in

fashion – not because no one minded but no one actually cared.

The Doctor looked up and down the deserted pavement and pulled

his most bemused face. ‘Now that’s a minor inconvenience,’ he said to a 1ather sleek cat who was also examining the street from behind a wheelie bin.

‘Not losing her,’ he added cheerfully. ‘That happens a lot – but

finding her again can take valuable time out of a fellow’s day.’

The cat’s large pointed ears bent flat along its head as it watched him warily.

‘And I was hoping to go to the zoo.’

A couple of streets away, Leela crouched behind the red box, cursing the creak her jeans were making. A ridiculous garment, supposedly made for ease and comfort, they were as stiff as baked clay and far noisier than skins. Noise was one thing Leela hated making, especially when stalking a beast. She peered through the glass of the red box at the large animal raking through the shiny black bags and slipped a dart into one hand. She had wondered momentarily if the red box was

another TARDIS – it was the same shape and size, although she could see through it to the street beyond. Who knew what dimensions

governed this seemingly benign shape? She was well used to optical illusions now but the thing would be no use for concealment unless it was trick glass. For the moment she would stay outside. She was out

of range to use a dart but the beast seemed more interested in its hunt for food and had not yet got her scent. A distant scream made no impact on her sharpened poise – it only told her there were more of them.

The Doctor stiffened at the sound and raised both eyebrows as the cat vanished in a streak of black and ginger spots. It had been a human scream, not Leela's of course, and it was coming from further along the street, behind the main gates ahead of him. The Doctor stood and

listened, his face falling into a concentrated frown as a flock of pink birds rose like giant arrows into the sky from a blanket of grey mesh beyond the gates. Silence was most informative, he mused

appreciatively: it held information unique to itself and, of course, it framed noise beautifully. As if on cue, a short, series of screeches shot up like aural flares. Trust the monkeys to be practical, he thought.

The Doctor flashed a look around the street for a streak of denim.

Whilst he considered his powers of communication to be well above average, there were many situations where the insight of the

proved invaluable. A tiny movement focused his attention back on the gates. A great believer in standing and facing his destiny, the Doctor turned full-on to meet the new arrival– a small mop-haired child

lurching uncertainly out onto the pavement, sporting plump, tear-

stained cheeks and clutching a limp cuddly toy tightly in one hand.

'Hello,' offered the Doctor cheerfully. 'And what's your name?' The child gaped at him dully and hiccupped.

'Excellent,' said the Doctor. 'I can see we're going to be great

friends.' Keeping an eye on the gates behind the child, he approached.

'Tell me, you haven't seen a young lady in jeans with long hair and a hunting knife in there, have you? It's just that I'd promised to take her to see the elephants and I rather wanted it to be a surprise.'

The child's gaze slid off the Doctor onto the street beyond.

'Didn't think so. One sight of wildlife and she has a tendency to turn invisible.'

On close inspection, the child looked rather dazed. He had clearly been crying for some time and retreated into an exhausted stupor, there were dark muddy streaks down the front of his bubble jacket and in his hand – The Doctor's wide smile tightened. It was no cuddly toy that hung from the boy's grip, it was a wallaby– small, no more than a baby itself and very dead.

Stanley rolled his eyes up again into his head for want of further respite from the view. One of the benefits of being an evil genius was seeing your mad and violent plans come to fruition, watching your victims cower in terror, flee for their lives, beg for their loved ones. What use was a twisted mind of vast intelligence when he couldn't see further than a foot of light ahead of him and a few inches of blackness

everywhere else? He had caught a flash of the pounce, seen the woman taken down, the idiot child backing away but, even moving close up to the glass, he couldn't make anything out at floor level.

He belched out a tiny bubble of stale gas in languid disappointment, feeling the icy grip of the liquid he was suspended in working its cruel and monotonous punishment on his body through sheer osmosis. Oh,

for the release of going belly-up, he thought, reaching out to a mind with stronger muscles, the weight and the recklessness to break the glass and toss him like offal into a waiting mouth.

The child's face had paled, the plump once-red cheeks already

blanking out the memory of recent events. The Doctor pushed his hand into his pocket for something distracting– a sweet, a yo-yo...

He heard a focused whizzing sound pass his right ear before he heard the roar. Then two massive pads hit him squarely in the back and sent

him almost crashing down onto the child. Hot, stinking breath engulfed the back of his neck and the next second he was pinned to the

pavement by an unimaginable weight

'Doctor!'

Leela grabbed at his coat sleeves sprawled beneath the still-panting mass and tugged.

‘Leela, I’m glad to see you too but there’s no need to hug me quite so hard.’

With a grunt of frustration and straining muscles, she pushed the enormous weight off him and sat by his side, catching her breath. The Doctor rolled over and stared up at the sky.

‘Well, I feel a lot flatter,’ he said.

Leela pushed his face round to where the body of a fully-grown

lioness lay sprawled across the pavement.

‘Oh.’

‘It’s a lion.’

‘Yes.’

‘You said this was a civilised country.’

‘I would never say that about England,’ he said, dusting off his

battered hat.

‘There are more. I smelt dog too – a wild one.’

‘Yes, I had a rather nice conversation with a mountain lynx not five minutes ago.’

‘Do they do it for sport?’

‘What?’

‘Let animals out among the people?’

‘No, for sport they lock them up in cages.’ The Doctor crawled over to the beautiful animal, putting his hand to the pulse in the neck.

‘Leela, it’s dead.’

‘Better it than you.’

He felt deep into its fur and plucked out a sharp wooden thorn. ‘I thought I’d confiscated these.’

‘And now you are pleased you didn’t.’

He pursed his lips, but a sudden nudge from his memory made him

spin around. The street behind them was empty.

‘The child went in there,’ Leela said, pointing to the gates. ‘What was it doing with the dead animal?’

‘Hiccupping,’ said the Doctor vaguely, watching a small golden-

haired monkey curl athletically around a lamppost above them. He

stood up and walked purposely towards the wrought-iron gates. ‘Come on.’

‘What is this place?’

‘The source of all the entertainment, Leela,’ beamed the Doctor.

‘London Zoo!’

Hot dog wrappers and drinks cups rolled about the deserted pathways as the Doctor studied a cluster of signposts just beyond the ticket office and turnstiles.

‘Reptile house – no. Bat cave –’

‘Smells of death.’

‘Actually your average bat cave smells of cheese – it’s rotten fruit really fermented with droppings.’

Leela wrinkled her nose. ‘Death,’ she said with simple finality.

‘Fascinating creatures, bats. The young ones can be very cheeky,

hovering inches from your face working out your exact expression with sonar. I came across an entire of super-advanced, funnel-ears once –

we got on famously.’

‘Where are the humans?’ Leela had her hand deep within her jacket and this hadn’t gone unnoticed by the Doctor.

‘Far away from here if they have any sense,’ he replied. ‘This may be

your first zoo visit, Leela, but let me tell you the animals are usually kept inside their cages.'

He crammed his hat firmly on his head and was about to set off

down a shrub-lined pathway when, for the second time in ten minutes, the wind was knocked out of him as Leela dragged him behind a large fern. They watched as a gang of chattering baboons streaked past, leapt over the turnstiles and disappeared into the street beyond – a chorus of car alarms greeted their arrival within moments.

There was a rustle of fern as the Doctor and Leela's heads

reappeared. 'Something has happened here,' she said.

The Doctor nodded gravely, savouring the obvious. 'Maybe we

should ask the zoo keeper.'

Leela looked up in surprise and followed his gaze through the

foliage and past the thick bars of a large cage behind them where a rather white-faced man in a smart green fleece sat in the lap of a silver backed gorilla, having his hair stroked very flatly to his head.

The two approached the cage tentatively, the Doctor flashing a wide smile, which the man very weakly returned. The gorilla, used to being stared at, took no notice of the visitors and continued smoothing the man's head in a touchingly paternal gesture.

'Good afternoon,' said the Doctor in hushed tones. 'You don't mind if I ask you a few things very quietly, do you? I'd advise you to just nod or shake your head.'

The man shook his head almost imperceptibly, a trickle of sweat

running down the side of his nose. The gorilla grunted softly, its eyes half-closed in repose.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, pulling Leela's arm gently away from her other pocket where he imagined she kept he1 thorns. 'Now as a man who works closely with animals you will know that the gorilla cage is possibly the safest enclosure you could be in. The other

predators wouldn't dare enter and your friend here has taken well to

your scent and welcomed you into his domestic habitat. It would, in fact, be more dangerous to attempt to remove you at the present

moment.'

The man's head nodded fractionally, if possible he became even

paler. 'And unless you can fire eight at once, Leela, you are also more likely to aggravate the situation.'

Leela's arm withdrew from her left pocket

'So,' grinned the Doctor in his most cheerful whisper. 'For now, my friend, I'd just sit back and enjoy your relative comfort.'

The man nodded, another stream of sweat joining the first.

'In the meantime,' continued the Doctor, 'which way to the

aquarium?'

So the stupid thing was back again, thought Stanley, and still dribbling molten toffee down its chubby chin. This really was a primitive race.

The infant could not have been more than three years in growth – but at three years Stanley had been leading his first military campaign.

Embarrassing, really. Oh, well, genetics gets what it deserves and if humans are to die out by their own neglectful arrogance, so be it. And if Stanley simply speeded the process up by having their own exotic pets break free and exact a little revenge – well, 'a captive freed is a enemy earned'. He felt his backbone give an involuntary thrash,

longing to persuade the thick glass to crack before the fat child's face.

Useless tadpole of a creature, sucking up air as it mutates into the lumpen toad its mother was.

Stanley could make out the fresh tears on the brat's face as it stared down at where, no doubt, the remains of its mother lay. He tried to imagine the work a fully grown Bengal tiger could do to a non-mutitious biped and felt his bony mouth stretch into the equivalent of a smile. Maybe life would get better from this point? He was safely out of harm's reach and utterly blameless of course.

A quiver undulated through his rotund shape as the face of the child

filled the glass before him, stretched out like the face of the moon, waxy and wet, its pale blue eyes boring into his deep black ones.

Yes? Can I help you, idiot one? Do wait around until the shyer creatures make it out and come looking for fresh blood. It's no skin off my bony nose.

A thrill of humour chased round his glistening body and he saw the 182

pupils in the pale blue eyes narrow. His world distorted further as the glass condensed the child's hot breath and all was face and flesh.

So you are primitive too? Child as animal. Almost interesting.

'Doctor!'

'I see it,' he said, glancing back up at the sleek golden acrobat watching them from a telegraph pole, a jangle of metal hanging from its black slit of a mouth.

'What is it eating?'

'The keys to the zoo, I should imagine. A Golden Lion Tamarind

monkey. Tiny, priceless and extremely clever. Whoever started this made sure the keys got into the right hands. Our little friend there's been having a wonderful time letting various cats out of various bags, I'm sure.'

He caught her wrist as it crept towards that left pocket.

'I would not miss,' she protested, twisting her arm out of his vice-like grip

'I'm sure you wouldn't,' he said, 'but I think we should keep hold of what you've got for now.'

Leela glanced at him in surprise, then at the ground as her feet

crunched into a smatter of shattered glass that led out of a nearby tunnel entrance. The Doctor's step had quickened. Leela opened her mouth to object, saw the mural of snakes and alligators on the tunnel wall, and decided to speed up herself.

'The monkey broke the glass?'

‘To make friends with a python? Unlikely. I imagine whatever was

behind the glass just decided life looked better the other side – or at least tastier.’

‘Then the zoo was dangerous and the man deserves to be inside with the big ape.’

‘I shall tell him that when we pass him again,’ said the Doctor

grinning. ‘That was thick safety glass, Leela. And reptiles don’t usually think to break glass.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because reptiles do not have thoughts. Oh, they have instincts but for an entire zoo population to share the very same instinct on the very same morning, well, that’s rather like a chimpanzee bashing out

Hamlet, *Faust* and *Oedipus Rex* on a manual typewriter over breakfast.’

He grinned down at her utterly blank face.

‘Exciting, though, wouldn’t you say?’

A thundering of tonnage on concrete hit like a truck as three gigantic grey shapes burst out from beyond the reptile house. Leela threw

herself onto the ground with a shriek, chunks of glass flying. The Doctor, who had followed his usual response of standing firm in the path of fate, watched in fascination as the monstrous creatures pounded through a wall of wire fencing and into the zoo car park. Smiling slightly at the sound of crashed metal and whining alarms, he stared down at the huddled shape at the mouth of the tunnel.

‘Leela, I’m surprised at you. I bring you thousands of years across time and space to see an elephant and suddenly you decide to get

nervous.’ Spitting out lumps of safety glass, Leela backed off against the closest wall for support.

‘And you screamed.’

‘I did not!’

‘First time I’ve heard you do that.’

‘I did not scream! They were filling the air – it hurt.’

‘Trumpeting. I imagine they were very scared.’

‘Scared!’

‘Size is not relative to courage, Leela. I’ve met some very brave cockroaches in my time. Arrogant, in fact. And look at you.’

‘I’m not small.’

‘Exactly – and the noise you make!’

He held out a hand. She ignored it indignantly and slid up the wall until she was standing.

‘And you’d better get out of the reptile house,’ he added, eyes

twinkling. ‘Some of the nastiest snakes are very small indeed.’

Waves of suspension liquid seemed to burn through Stanley as he

stared at the obnoxious infant. Perhaps he could burn through its neural pathways just by overloading it with information.

Go on. Have a seizure. Think of something greater than your two-times table, your bag of sweaty sweets and your mother’s guts spilled at your feet. Take my life, my 4000 years of mental prowess,

superlative cerebral evolution, sheer brilliance in leadership – run the oceans, direct the tides, regulate the shoals, the pods and the beds until you go insane!

Stanley couldn’t see the face any more. The great fleshy pudding had vanished. Dropped to the ground with the weight of knowledge and

responsibility. Good. All there was now were the inches of blackness and the boring corridor. A vibrating clang sounded from on high, not that he heard it but he imagined he did, like the like the lid of the first spaceship torn off by a great god and all the astronauts picked out like herring. The liquid lurched around his body suddenly – or did he lurch within it. Lurch – perch – sole – soul – oh, the joy of words. His mouth, open in its perpetual ‘O’ attempted a word. A tiny bubble of

gas rose thickly out of sight. There, thought Stanley, I have spoken.

Leela's face was a picture. Lit up by the myriad of tanks, it was a perfect oval of wonder as she traced the lazy tentacle of a reef squid feeling its way up the glass.

The Doctor, however, was desperate for more light. He did not

possess the olfactory gifts of the Sevateem but there was no mistaking the stench of death in this dank maze. Eager as a child, Leela seemed to have switched off all senses but one as she drew closer to the unearthly light that held a skein of floating jellyfish seemingly in mid-air.

'Is it magic?' she asked breathlessly.

'Clever lighting,' said the Doctor, 'which is what most magic boils down to, I suppose.'

'It's beautiful.'

' *Chrysaora quinquecirrha*,' he said. 'Very beautiful from a distance.'

He watched the rest of her senses vying for her attention, wondering how many more seconds it would take her.

'Blood,' she said instantly, looking straight down at the floor.

The Doctor nodded. 'Bloodbath in the aquarium. Not the first place I would have placed one in a zoo.'

'Female. Dead about half an hour.'

You had to hand it to her, he thought, it was better than travelling with Arthur Conan Doyle. Letting his eyes adjust to the lighting, the Doctor pushed on further into the maze. Leela's tight fist held on to his coat.

'Danger, Doctor.'

'I know.'

'So why are we going in?'

Because someone or something in this zoo is making creatures

behave in very odd ways.'

They turned into a corridor lined with shiny black panelled walls.

Leela stepped carefully to avoid the suspiciously-shaped lumps of torn flesh lying around their feet, her hand firmly in her jacket.

‘Some- *thing*?’

‘Well,’ pondered the Doctor, ‘I suppose he is a he. I stand corrected.’

‘He? Who is he? Doctor, who are you talking about?’

The panels, when seen from a closer distance now revealed

themselves to be glass-fronted tanks, each lit in some creatively emotive way depending on its occupant – spiny eels and puffer fish, emerald catfish and leopard sailfins, whiptails and glowlights, Kois and redbelly minnows – or so spotted the photo-labels on the walls.

It was all very beautiful and educational, except for the fact that each tank was empty of water, and a number of colourful corpses lay

sprawled on the bottom of every one.

The Doctor stopped in front of one of the tanks and removed his hat with a flourish of courtesy.

‘Leela, I think it’s time to introduce you to one of Earth’s most long-serving foreign guests.’

At his side, Lees peered through the thick glass, darkened by a

growth of algae and fronting a tank no more than a metre square. Next to the tank was a collection tin standing beneath a jolly sign which read:

SAVE OUR STANLEY!

The largest purple codfish in captivity, Stanley is thought to be around 50 years old. This tank has been specially made for his protection.

Please donate generously to his wellbeing.

THANK YOU!

‘What is it?’ asked Leela, uninterested.

‘Well if you believe the sign, it is a fifty-year-old purple cod fish called Stanley.’

The Doctor tapped the glass. Nothing happened. Leela was clearly

getting impatient, he could almost feel her finger testing the blade of her knife.

‘Doctor, whatever killed this woman will come back. Predators

always return to the kill.’

‘Oh, I rather think Stanley has sent them off to wreak further

mischief, don’t you? He’s having much more fun, aren’t you, Stanley?’

‘Why are you talking to the glass? Everything is dead here!’

‘Not Stanley,’ the Doctor said, not taking his eyes off the murky tank. ‘Stanley can never die, can you, my fishy friend?’

Out of the gloom came a bony jaw topped with two silver-rimmed

eyes. The scaly body seemed to blow out from the back of the head almost spherically from this angle and layers of tattered purple and yellow skin streamed out like an ancient bride’s veil.

‘Stanley is a big fish,’ said Leela helpfully.

‘The truth is,’ said the Doctor, ‘Stanley is not just a fish. Well, not in our sense of the species. In fact, he’s not even a Stanley, although I must say the new name does suit him. My dear Leela, meet General

Secretary Muirgen Epinephelus III of the Black-fin Army of

Halemida.’

Leela stared blankly at the watery eyes. Then she turned to the

Doctor, her own eyes narrowing.

‘This is no place to make me a fool.’

‘I assure you, Leela, I would do no such thing!’ The Doctor turned back to the tank. ‘He’s not very talkative at the moment. I imagine

he's trying to work out our brain patterns. I expect he knows he's in trouble, we must be vigilant.'

Leda finally drew her knife.

'Really, Leela, he can't get you through that glass – it's about as thick as your fist. No, he'll be working out a plan faster than a flying salmon, now think of something complicated.'

Leela frowned up at him.

'Would you like some help?'

'What is it, this General Black-thing?' she demanded.

'Oh, only the most dangerous political prisoner this universe has ever seen. Some call him a genius. Not the several million life forms tortured and killed under his dictatorship, I expect. That type of accolade usually comes from war historians and armchair theorists several generations after the event.'

'Please speak English,' said Leela. 'Do you want me to kill him?'

The Doctor raised both eyebrows. 'That's not the Halemidan way,

Leela. You see, despite the rather charitable sign here, this is no ordinary aquarium tank. It's been built with the superior knowledge of an entire sea-dwelling race and filled with a self-generating enzyme that repairs cells indefinitely.'

'I said speak English!'

'Quite. Sorry,' said the Doctor. 'In short then, Stanley here can never die. In fact I believe he has outlived his natural age by at least twenty centuries.'

'He must be very bored.'

The Doctor wrinkled his nose as he moved his face closer to the

thick glass, catching a faint whiff of enzo-gel. The great Halemidan fish stared right back. It could have been looking at him, it could have been looking past him into the great plains of history, or into a future undreamt of by any living organism. The Doctor felt his body give an involuntary shudder, as if several thousand scales had lifted from his skin in a clammy breeze. 'I've wanted to visit this fellow for some time. General Muirgen is a living legend, a myth in some galaxies.

Exiled to life imprisonment on an under-evolved planet where the

closest thing to a concentration camp for sea-creatures is a zoo.

Imagine, Leela. To a great, albeit evil, mind, this existence is a living, perpetual hell.'

He stared into the dead black eyes.

'He probably started off bored but I think he went past that some time ago. I don't think he's bored now. I think he's very, very angry.'

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A piercing scream echoed from way off.

'That came from outside,' said Leela. 'From the street.'

Another scream followed almost immediately after.

'That came from inside,' she added.

Then a roar.

'So did that.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor, squashing his large nose against the glass as if trying to see into the great fishy mind. 'An incredible race, the Halemidans. A peace-loving democracy with unbelievably fast

evolutionary development. Unfortunately, it was restricted only to their minds so they never quite made it out of the water. And, as the waters receded once their sun began to die, civilisation on the entire planet collapsed. He's the last of his kind and he doesn't even know it.'

The next thing the Doctor knew was a sharp pain in his neck. His

eyes focused on the glass where the reflection of Leela holding her knife to his throat loomed quite clearly over the body of the suspended fish.

'Leela,' he gasped, attempting to turn. The knife point pressed

further into his skin and he watched a small bubble of air release itself from the bony mouth.

Primitive animal minds are easier to read, control – how else do you think

a diminishing race of sea-lords ruled aver a planet of land dwellers?

A low growl emanated from the mouth of the tunnel. Something had smelt blood, something had returned to the kill.

Leela's hand was firm on the knife but the Doctor could feel her breath unusually shaken. She was fighting the superior mind – but for how long?

'Leela! What are four sevens?'

The knife pricked his skin, a dribble of blood can down his collar.

Bad choice, he thought, she'd always hated mathematics. And being patronised.

'Did you know,' he gasped, 'that a fresh-water hydra is only one millimetre in length and can regenerate damaged body parts at will. Which is ironic really as it has no brain of any sort.'

The knife remained quite firmly where it was.

'Now, our fishy friend here has one of the biggest brains in the cosmos and has never evolved beyond the lump of scales you see before you.' If anything, the knife pressed harder into his flesh.

'Ah, you see, Leda, jealousy is a very primitive emotion and the general was never able to master it! I have an extraordinary brain as you well know and, although not in the least as self-important and arrogant as Muirgen's, I do have the added skill of being able to 188 regenerate and can proudly say I have done so three times –'

Leda dropped the knife instantly. 'What do you mean not self-important and arrogant!'

'I knew that would get you,' grinned the Doctor rubbing his neck.

'No good with maths but always up for a row!'

She stared furiously at him, then at the tank.

‘Keep focused,’ said the Doctor immediately. He had her mind back, he couldn’t afford to lose it again. ‘Use your nose – there’s something out there and we don’t want to get cornered.’

Leela had the knife already pointed towards the end of the corridor.

‘Two of them,’ she said.

‘Excellent,’ said the Doctor, turning back to the tank. Now the

general had broken his link with Leela, he was free to establish one with anything out there. Talk to me, thought the Doctor desperately, I have a primitive side...

A low growl came from the entrance, immediately answered by a

snarl from the opposite end of the corridor. They were cornered.

‘Oh, dear,’ said Leek with stark eloquence.

Go on, thought the Doctor. I act like a child a great deal of the time.

I have enormous intelligence but I can bury it in a second and be most pedantic and annoying I assure you. And I am flesh and bone and

blood, just like the creatures you presided over – take your chance, let me in! Think of the things you could make me do! You have surely

out-evolved your former masterly self – come on, take a swipe at a Time Lord’s brain! Or are you just as dumb as you look to the

Earthling tourists? A bloated piece of cod from beyond the Thames Estuary?

‘Arg!’ The Doctor crumpled with the impact of the giant mind as it invaded his own like a beached whale and began to swallow his nerve endings alive. His hands tried to find a grip on the tank, his fingers squeaking and sliding across its surface, his ace finding small solace in the cool glass.

In a tortured second, the Doctor realised the scale of his mistake. He had suffered his fair share of mind invasions in his time, indeed so many that he was convinced he could hear his own frazzled brain

rattling around his head in quiet moments in the TARDIS. But this was

something else. This over-developed fish brain was at the forefront of cognitive evolution and, fed for centuries on live cell-renewal energy, it had reached the boundaries of sentient intelligence whilst never breaking free of its metre-square jail. Muirgen had gone past bored all right. He had also gone past angry – the pain of the Doctor's knees cracking on concrete was nothing as he fell. General Muirgen had

invented an entire new state of being to encompass his hatred, his 189

resentment, his frustration, the utter monstrosity of his rage and entrapment. The weight of this existence hit the Doctor like an ocean of black water and pulped him through as if he were mere sponge.

Aware he had stopped breathing, he focused his attention on his hearts, desperately trying to slow them down but the shock of the fish's mind and the depth to which it had suddenly plummeted him had his blood pressure thumping out a military tattoo in his chest.

That's right, Lord of Time, march behind your general, in step to his pain, and see the insignificance of all your worth in one drowned second.

The roar of the ocean filled the Doctor's ears – his mouth was open but he couldn't suck up the air. He was lying at the bottom of

everything that ever was whilst a war raged overhead – it was every beast for itself. He felt a large shape leap over his body, huge paws lost their grip and thudded into the wall – somewhere a giant dog howled.

His own hands slid on the concrete beneath him and he had an

overwhelming taste of peanuts. 'Doctor!' Leela kicked him roughly, her attention on both ends of the corridor. 'Can I use the Janis thorns now?'

Primitive mind!

Now he could hear laughter, but of course he couldn't hear it: it was like heavy rain on the surface of primordial soup. And in the midst of it all, a tiny black mouth in a neat golden face – innocent, watching, taking everything in.

Stanley sucked on the Time Lord, searching for the nutrients of decent, interesting thought and spitting out the rest. There was nothing in here it hadn't already grasped. In fact it was an ape, a series of apes with different coloured hair and equally annoying laughs. He hated this ape

– for its freedom, freedom to travel beyond a metre square, freedom to grace hundreds of worlds within its benign presence, leaving its stamp on nothing. He heard the throbbing of the ape's hearts quicken, or imagined he did, like the boots of time stamping on the fate of a world.

In then, in the black heart of his tank, Stanley saw the vast red star swelling in the sky, boiling the seas, twisting a billion bony mouths into silent screams. He saw the death of his world for the first time and the vastness that should be his existence, his future, his matchless potential within the yawning black chasm of slimy glass walk falling away into the open mouth of space.

The Doctor sucked in a torturously slow lungful of air. There was a savage slashing of fur and claw in the corner of his vision – if she was still moving, Leela was silent. *Take it all, the Doctor thought, suck it* 190

all up, Muirgen, all you need to know because there's not a great lot you can do about it now.

With the weight of a great sea, he lifted himself up on shaking hands and stared into the great fish's eyes, disc-like and passionless.

Reflected in the black pupils, he could see bodies twisting–were they in the corridor behind him or in the past? The Doctor focused in on the smallest thing he could find to stop himself passing out – peanuts.

Peanuts and toffee. His fingers closed over the congealed paper bag in his fist.

Boy – child – dead wallaby – dead mother. The thin black mouth chattered in alarm from the treetops as it watched the death toll mount

– golden hair flashed through the sky like sun flares over a lost world.

Then, as suddenly as it had descended, the great mental mouth lifted off him leaving the Doctor gasping like a fish on the wet floor. Leek leapt to his side.

'Are you alive?'

'I have no idea.'

'A wolf and a tiger,' she panted. 'I think they were more interested in each other – it gave me time to finish them both. Shall I do the fish next?' Dazed, the Doctor looked at the bodies of the two beasts then up at Stanley's tank, breath coming to him in shuddering streams. The

great general had moved. He was now facing upwards, towards the lid of the tank where the Doctor could see a new source of light.

‘I think someone’s beaten you to it,’ he said, the world still spinning.

Perched on the lip of the tank’s edge was a small golden acrobatic shape, its tail curling delicately in the air for balance as it returned a jangle of keys to its black mouth with a tiny hand.

‘It’s opened the tank!’ said Leela.

‘Unlocked it certainly,’ said the Doctor. ‘But I think it had some help.’ Crouched over the ancient algae-coated tank, bobbed a mess of blond curls, as the Doctor watched, two tiny child’s hands wrestled clumsily with an arrangement of dials. There was a small hiss, like a private sigh followed by a glug of thick fluid and then silence.

‘The boy is helping the monkey,’ said Leela.

‘Or the monkey helping the boy,’ said the Doctor, watching the tank like a hawk.

Stanley, or General Muirgen, was certainly moving now. With great flicks of his fat tail, he glided from wall to wall of the slimy square as the two golden-haired accomplices crouched above the liquid surface.

‘What are they waiting for?’ asked Leela.

‘Gravity, I expect,’ said the Doctor, his eyes fixed on the level of the enzo-gel in the tank. A small line of green film was showing just above the level of liquid and the gap between was steadily growing as the 191

tank slowly emptied. Muirgen’s tattered head rebounded off the sides, dislodging years of green algae.

‘Can’t he do anything to stop it?’ asked Leela.

The child and the monkey seemed utterly absorbed in the emptying

tank, their expressions almost identical, bright yet calm, as if sharing the same thoughts

The thin black mouth chattered in alarm from the treetops...

The Doctor nudged Leela next to him, not taking his eyes off the

golden pair.

Took into his eyes, Leela,' he said, 'the eyes of the general, and tell me what you feel.'

He saw Leela's clear blue eyes meet the stark wet ones of the great fish as it came to rest at the bottom of the tank. He didn't need to hear the answer.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Deadness.'

'In so great a mind?' pondered the Doctor. 'So, is the general

resigned to his fate or has he instructed it?'

Leela looked up at the boy and the monkey.

'He is controlling them? Then he wants to die?'

The Doctor frowned. 'I think it's some kind of agreement – a truce.'

'A truce? A pact?'

'Possibly. It is widely believed amongst zoologists that most animals carry with them a kind of evolutionary, memory, a subconscious

recollection of primordial events within their species –'

'English!'

'Domestic dogs, for example, still circle several times before lying down as they were used by primitive man in hunting and had to flatten the long grass to sleep.'

'So what is the fish doing?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Atoning for past crimes? Recent ones? Or

maybe he is finally answering to fate.'

Within the tank, slimy rocks gleamed, the combed green hai1 lying slick over their surfaces as the liquid receded from them. Muirgen's purple-black top fin was showing above the level of the viscous fluid, wilting to one side as he made one last venture across the pebbly bottom. The child and the monkey did not seem to be breathing, such was their concentration. As the Doctor watched, the tiny monkey's hand rested on the plump forefinge1 of the child.

‘The Golden Lion Tamarind monkey did not originate in Brazil on

Earth as is commonly thought,’ the Doctor mused. ‘The breed made up one of the sub-species of the Kalani Three – the three planets in the Nuriel system. One of which was Halemida.’

Leela let out a long impatient hiss.

‘In short,’ he added, ‘Our golden keeper of the keys here has a very long genetic memory of the general’s war crimes.’

‘Monkeys are just animals,’ Leela protested. ‘Clever when they want food but –’

‘But as instinctive as your average three-year-old,’ said the Doctor.

They watched the child’s bright eyes swimming with the reflections of the sinking fluid beneath.

‘These two may not understand the grudge they bear Muirgen but

the vast evolutionary brainpower he has manipulated them with today has certainly sparked something. Who knows what genes really are?

Even the most advanced scientists only know a fraction of the

information they carry. Muirgen’s molecular genealogy allows him to evolve a multitude of new brain patterns in one lazy afternoon, many of them he doesn’t even bother to use.’

He could feel Leela’s own brain straining at his side.

‘Patterns,’ he grinned. ‘Like minds, shared loss.’ His glance swept up the two entwined predators behind them, lying in a Janis sleep.

‘Things that are the same like other things that are the same. They join together, hunt together, take revenge together. It’s a powerful

attraction.’

The last few inches of the enzo-gel flooded out from under the

prisoner and he fell, a great body of scales and bone and flesh, pulped out with false life, the gills bleeding clear fluid in rasping spurts. The last thing to move was the mouth, stuck in its gaping ‘O’ it finally

closed as the purple and yellow head came to rest on the gravel.

‘He does not fight,’ said Leela, puzzled.

The Doctor’s eyes were on the boy and the monkey. They had

already lost interest in the tank, the monkey waiting patiently as the boy clambered down and curled up on a nearby bench.

‘Muirgen may have wanted to die. Once he learned of his planet’s

fate, the futility of his existence in history. Or, he could have redoubled his efforts of revenge. He certainly could have had another bash at controlling more victims. But, for once in his life, things might have been out of his control.’

The boy was already lost to exhaustion. The tiny golden-haired

monkey leapt onto the child’s chest and also curled up into a deep sleep. The bunch of keys slid from its tiny fingers and clanked onto the wet floor.

‘And people say elephants have long memories,’ said the Doctor.

Outside the car alarms could still be heard, together with a growing chorus of police and ambulance sirens. Shouts and warning shots could be heard from the surrounding zoo.

‘They’ve brought out the guns already,’ said the Doctor. ‘When all 193

they need to do is talk to them. Come on – Madame Tussauds might

still be open.’

‘What about the keeper?’ asked Leela as they emerged once more

into the daylight.

‘Oh, he seemed a sensible chap,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ve spent some surprisingly civilised days with gorillas. He might learn a thing or two.’

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The Doctor was raiding the filing cabinets, pulling folders out seemingly at random, while Ronnie quickly read anything the Doctor passed to him. Emily and Will kept watch by the archive-room door.

'What a minute, Colonel,' said Will in a low voice. 'We come all the way back to 1957 to find out who stole huge chunks of UNIT's archive – and we then find out it was us. Not only that, but the reason we came was to satisfy the Doctor's curiosity – and it turns out the files had to be destroyed because of...

the Doctor?'

'Still don't believe in coincidences, Hoffman?'

He smiled. Emily knew that he could tell she was having problems getting her head round everything too. When they got back home, she thought, she'd ask Brimmicombe-Wood if Hoffman could be her second. He'd rib her, of course – go on about how the English rose wanted her thorns close by, or something. But she trusted Hoffman and knew what a close ally he would be.

'Don't you worry, though, Doctor?' said Will.

'What about, Lieutenant?'

'Well... I was going to ask about changing the future. But I suppose we're assuring it, aren't we?'

'Indeed.' The Doctor slammed a drawer shut. 'The universe is made up of so many variables – decisions, actions, seemingly random events. Every one has its repercussions. Every single one has consequences. If we don't create this lacuna, then the us in the twenty-first century won't come back to solve the mystery –'

'So it's true...' Ronnie Tillyard had gone pale. He slowly sat down at one of the desks. 'I supposed you must have been from the future. But that's ridiculous, isn't it? All a bit H. G. Wells or whatever.'

'Yes, Ronnie, I'm from the future. All three of us are.'

Tillyard smiled – he's processing the information, Emily thought, making it all click inside his head. After a moment, he stood and carried on looking through files, searching out documents that needed taking away and destroying.

Emily whispered to the Doctor, 'Are you sure we can trust him?'

'Who? Ronnie? Yes, of course.' The Doctor's eyes twinkled.

She knew that look. 'You know him, don't you? Even if he doesn't know

you.'

'You could say that,' the Doctor admitted. 'We have a mutual friend, you might say. Remember in the White Rabbit? There was a man there called Edward Grainger. He and I go way back – although, when we met him in 1940

he didn't recognise me. Well, Ronnie is a friend of his. Our paths have crossed before.'

Emily was dumbfounded. Her mouth hung open.

The Doctor's brow furrowed. 'A bit of a coincidence, that, I suppose.'

It took them all night to cover every part of the archive Ronnie thought was relevant. By dawn, their task was finished. They said their goodbyes to Ronnie –

he had a plane to catch, back to New York– and crept away from Whitehall as best they could. Emily and Will walked ahead of the Doctor as they approached the TARDIS.

'So, Hoffman – how was your first day?'

'My first week and half, I think you mean! All that business in Lewisham. The shadows and the people going loopy. That feels so long ago.'

'Yes, it does,' said Emily. 'But that's what happens when you get a Code Blue. Don't imagine it'll be the last one of your UNIT career.'

The Doctor caught them up, and opened the door. 'So…' he said. 'Back to the twenty-first century?'

Anywhere there's a bed,' said Hoffman, as he went inside. Emily leaned against the TARDIS shelf for a moment.

'Yes, Emily?' said the Doctor. 'I know that look. What's on your mind?'

'Do you think about your legacy?'

The Doctor took a big breath and exhaled long while he thought. 'I'm not sure – do you mean, do I care what people think?'

'No, Doctor, I mean the effect you have. I've known you long enough now to see how much good you do. But, this lacuna… what if we or Ronnie

hadn't managed to get rid of it? You talked of consequences. How can you know what every consequence of your actions is?'

'How can anyone, Emily? That's not why we live life.'

'But, do you think that, somewhere, there's something waiting for you... some loose end you haven't tidied up? Something that'll come back to haunt you?'

The Doctor held the TARDIS door open. 'I'm certain of it. It's almost as if it were scripted. Come along, Em. Let's get you home.'

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Twilight's End

Cavan Scott & Mark Wright

An adventure of the Seventh Doctor

The building rises into the night air like a sliver of ice, dominating the skyline.

Other skyscrapers huddle around this sleek needle, steel and glass arms stretching up into the sky but never catching their rival.

The most advanced computer system in the world cycles simultaneously through all 200 floors, assessing ambient temperature, humidity, airflow, energy consumption, structural stress, external wind velocity and localised seismic activity.

The computer monitors the heartbeat and body temperature of every living bring within the building, constantly adjusting atmospheric conditions to maximise comfort.

External sensors probe the surrounding airspace, correlating data with military-and civil-aviation networks. If any threat is perceived from an approaching aircraft, satellite weaponry systems would be online within a fraction of a second to neutralise the danger. Back-up weaponry batteries located on the building's superstructure are also at the computer's disposal.

The security net thrown around the building is the most sophisticated known to the world. Not even the smallest insect can penetrate this unique environment.

The computer is the building. The building is the computer.

It waits. It watches. Waiting for...

...a presence probes at the very edge of the computer's perception, molecules shifting barely perceptibly as something teases apart the threads of the universe.

Power surges through the highest-level security systems embedded deep within the core of the computer; synaptic circuits fire with energy, computing, calculating all parameters before alarms... alarms that are never activated. A system operating at a higher level than all others overrides the intruder protocols, taking it online. The computer has waited a long time for this and, as the presence probes deeper, looking for a way in, the computer lets it.

* * *

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A security guard in regulation black combat fatigues wandered down a corridor lit for optimum visual acuity for a human being, one hand as always on the sleek energy weapon hanging from his belt. He

approached an intersection and rounded the corner, walking straight into a solid wooden wall that hadn't been there when he'd walked this same corridor less than thirty minutes ago.

With a rasping squawk at odds with his macho appearance, the guard fell backwards, landing with a muted thud. His training kicked in immediately and the guard sprang to his feet, weapon out and pointed at the... at the...

... at the tall blue box standing in the middle of the corridor.

Without pausing, the guard grabbed the communicator from his belt and thumbed open a channel with calm, professional movements.

'Priority-one security alert,' he said with practised efficiency. 'Sir, we have a Code: Lazarus in the building!'

The raucous clamour of alarms blasted through the building as the Doctor sprinted down a long, plushly carpeted corridor, one hand

clamped on the little straw hat that was jammed onto his head,

umbrella in the other. He halted at the end of the corridor, where his path was blocked by the double doors of a lift. He threw a glance back

down the corridor, eyes sparkling in the bright lights blazing from the ceiling. All around he could hear the rhythmic softened thud of booted feet approaching from all angles.

'Oh, well,' he said as he fished into a pocket of his jacket. 'It was nice while it lasted.' Retrieving the silver wand of the sonic

screwdriver out of his pocket, he set to work on the control panel moulded into the tastefully pastel-coloured wall at the side of the doors.

The dull throb of the screwdriver vibrated the air around the Doctor, but it didn't drown out the sound of the ever-approaching boot steps.

The control panel beeped a negative note and the doors remained

stubbornly closed. The Doctor gritted his teeth.

Glancing behind once more, his eyes widened as he saw emerging

from the distant end of the corridor a swarm of dark smudges that soon coalesced into a squad of security guards. Cries of recognition

indicated he'd been spotted. The Doctor tweaked the shaft of the sonic screwdriver and renewed his assault on the lift controls.

Sparks haloed around the Doctor's head as an energy blast struck the wall above him. He ducked as another weapon discharge hit the wall.

'Come on, come on,' he urged quietly, and the dull throb of the

screwdriver raised in pitch before the controls gave off a friendly ping and the doors swished quickly open. With a smile of satisfaction, the
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Doctor grabbed his umbrella, bounded into the waiting lift and deftly pocketed the sonic screwdriver in one fluid movement.

The Doctor turned to see that the security guards were almost on

him, with shouts for him to surrender screaming down the corridor, along with more weapons discharge. He stabbed a button with the tip of his umbrella, turning his head calmly away from a cascade of sparks that erupted when an energy blast impacted inside the car.

As the lift doors began to close, the security guards were so near he could see the fury in their eyes. The Doctor lifted his hat, beamed a

wide smile at his pursuers as if he appreciated their efforts, and called a friendly, ‘Good day, gentlemen!’

The lead guard was forced to pull up quickly so as not to barrel into the now firmly closed doors. The squad commander stepped up behind

him and unclipped the communicator from his belt.

‘Get me the director!’ he barked into the device. ‘Sir? We lost him.’

The Doctor hared down yet another corridor, garish artwork of the corporate mindset hanging on the mute-coloured walls. The lift had deposited him somewhere a few floors above ground level and, if he was being honest, the Doctor didn’t really know where he was going.

But he carried on, regardless.

The Doctor’s brogues swished over the plush carpet that lined the floor of every corridor, and he literally slid to a halt at an intersection where four corridors converged. He looked quickly to the left to see an advancing squad of security guards and immediately prepared to run to the right, but again an approaching gang of men blocked his way.

‘Oh, dear,’ the Doctor mumbled, glancing behind to see the same

worrying situation. Even with the way ahead clear, the odds of evading capture this time were slim at best. The guards advancing from all sides, he glumly prepared to raise his hands in weary surrender. But then the Doctor’s eyes widened in surprise as, in quick sequence, three heavy security doors descended from the ceiling, all clunking into place and miraculously halting the approach of the guards.

The Doctor stood in the centre of the intersection, which was now eerily silent, chin resting on the handle of his umbrella as he looked quizzically from one blast door to the other. He turned and saw the clear corrido1 ahead, beckoning him forward. Shrugging, he sprinted forward once more. Another day, another corridor.

As the Doctor progressed through the network of walkways, the

same thing repeated itself over and over. A door sliding into place here, another opening there – the sequence, the Doctor quickly deduced, always kept him away from any security patrols, guiding him onwards 199

through this warren of faceless passages.

The Doctor ran past another security door that was dropping from

the ceiling, the shouts of more security guards extinguished as the dull, heavy steel clanked shut. He sped on through another clear intersection of corridors before coming up sharp. His progress was brought to a sudden halt by three resolutely closed doors. The Doctor turned back sharply, but was prevented from running back the way he'd come as another identical door plunged into place with a sigh of compressed air.

Whipping round, the Doctor backed himself against the door, tensing as he waited for something... anything... to happen.

The door directly ahead rose smoothly up, receding into the ceiling to reveal a small room with a familiar set of lift doors set into the wall.

The Doctor took a cautious step into the room, stopping as the lift doors slid apart to reveal the waiting car.

'The classic dilemma,' he mused, eyes scanning the interior of the car. 'Someone or something clearly wants me to step into that lift.' He thought for a second, pursing his lips as he weighed up a set of

universal pros and cons that only he was party to.

He breezily stepped forward into the lift. 'Omelettes and eggs,

Doctor,' he breathed as the doors began to slide closed on him.

'Omelettes and eggs.'

The lift doors opened with that annoyingly perky ping and the Doctor stood on the threshold, a bright metallic corridor stretching out before him. Silver cables ran like metal veins around the walls and ceiling, and he stepped out onto a heavy, brushed metal floor. Now this was more like it. This was familiar ground; obvious perhaps, but preferable to the faceless, corporate vulgarity above.

The Doctor knew he was now far below the surface of the city. Old habits die hard, he smiled to himself. Not far away at the edge of hearing, he could detect the vibrating rumble of the enormous gravitic centrifuges that maintained the integrity of the otherwise impossible structure above. And now the Doctor had the feeling that he had

arrived. He began to walk slowly down the corridor, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to break into a run and sprint towards his goal. He shivered as he thought he heard a whispe1 pass down the

corridor, urging him forward. But then it was gone.

‘Getting jumpy in your old age, Doctor?’ he murmured, absent-

mindedly reaching into his inside jacket pocket, just to make sure...

Yes, it was still there. Safe.

As his footsteps echoed eerily, the end of the corridor slowly came into focus and soon the Doctor could go no further. Thick, heavy-set metallic doom barred his way. He wondered which civilisation had

been plundered to provide these. He lightly brushed his finger against his metal and then put them to his tongue. ‘Hmm,’ the Doctor mused.

‘Could be Martian. With a hint of Huldran ore in there, I’d say.’

The Doctor was impressed. This place had been rigged to withstand the combined forces of the Dalek, Cyber and Slarvian empires. Yet, with just the merest sonic trickery and typical guile on his part, he’d managed to run around the place as if he owned it. Of course, he had.

Once.

The Doctor glanced to the side and placed his palm on the

rectangular box bolted to the wall. Bright white light shone around his hand, but a negative note sounded from the palm reader.

‘Access denied,’ a clinical female voice filtered into the corridor.

‘Level-one clearance required for entry to the primary core.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Oh, come now, Oracle. Is that any way to greet an old friend? We go back such a long way, you and I.’ The voice was just as he remembered it. Cultured, passionless, but decidedly... slinky.

Hex would probably have liked it.

‘Your presence in this facility is unauthorised.’

‘Yes, and the more you try to do something about it the more your security protocols are deactivated, rerouted, sent down blind alleys.

Frustrating, isn’t it? I wonder why that is, Oracle.’

‘Please explain your enquiry.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Ah you see, I can’t. I’m as much in the dark as you are. So the sooner you let me in, the quicker we can get to the bottom of things.’

‘Level-one clearance required for entry to the primary core.’

‘Yes, yes, yes. You said.’ The Doctor sighed. ‘Oh, well, it’s your choice. We could have done this the easy way.’

The Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and turned to point it directly at the heavy locking mechanism in the centre of the door. A logo ran around the lock’s circumference. The Doctor read it. ‘For King and Country.’ The Doctor set his face in an impassive mask and activated the screwdriver.

Within seconds, the lock turned through 180 degrees and with a

metallic thud and a sudden whine of hydraulics, the door begun to heave slowly open. A gust of stale, fetid air rushed towards him.

Darkness awaited the Doctor, save for the corridor of light that

extended into the room beyond, providing a path into the unknown.

‘Hello!’ he bellowed into the gloom. ‘Anybody there? Shop?’

Floodlights blazed suddenly into life all around the chamber, which was cathedral-like in size, more cables snaking around the highly vaulted walls and floor, all leading to a node bolted to the heavy 201

plating in the centre of the room. At the same instant, panels slid open at various junctures on the wall and sleek, needle-like beam weapons pivoted into place with a metallic clunk. They were all pointing at the Doctor’s slight form. With a wry smile, he doffed his hat into the murk of the room.

‘Now I’ve got your attention...’

‘Identity confirmed. You are the Doctor,’ Oracle’s synthesised voice purred around the chamber. ‘Code-named: Lazarus. Former scientific

adviser to UNIT. Your presence in this facility is not authorised.'

'I'm rarely authorised to be anywhere,' the Doctor said

apologetically. 'You are responsible for the destruction of the primary facility of this organisation.* You are responsible for the destruction of the secondary facility of this organisation. You are...'

'While I'm flattered you remember some of my greatest hits, could we possibly dispense with the CV?' the Doctor said impatiently.

'There's only one thing I want to know.'

'Please state the nature of your inquiry.'

'Where is he?'

'Please repeat your question.'

'No.'

'Please repeat your question.'

'Don't play games with me, Oracle. These aren't your rules.'

'Please repeat...'

'Where are you?' the Doctor bellowed, spinning on the spot as he

addressed the room. 'You brought me here. You guided me down into this rat's nest. It's time to stop hiding. Show yourself!'

The only sound in the room was the Doctor's breathing, his sudden anger subsiding as quickly as it came. Then came a click. A solitary, insignificant click. Then another. And another. The Doctor turned slowly to face the source of the sound, felt the floor vibrate beneath his feet as the node of cables in the floor began to crack apart like an egg.

Little-used hydraulic gears, dormant a second before, began to turn, and slowly a column of dark, sleek metal rose into the air. With a jolt, it shuddered to a halt and the column parted in two to reveal a mass of tubes, pulsating with viscous amber liquid. They writhed within the column like a nest of snakes, data pumping through the solution, an infinite number of calculations made at the speed of thought.

The mass of cables began to heave apart, squirming aside to reveal

something else at the centre of the coffin-like slab. A metal frame, like a gurney, pivoted forward, an emaciated figure crucified across its

* See Doctor Who: Project Lazarus (audio drama, 2003)

surface.

The Doctor looked on in disgust

The creature's skin was bloated, yet appeared sunken at the same

time, dead blue veins bright against its translucent sheen. The body, once hard and toned beneath layers of polycarbide armour hung

flaccid, 1iveted to the frame by massive bolts. Open wounds exposed a curious, stomach-turning concoction of flesh and wires and the tubes that continued to twitch and slide around the immobile form as if alive thrust themselves into its neck, temples and spine, rivulets of the data-fluid running down this wretched being's frigid hide.

The chest, once broad but now collapsed and misshapen, didn't

heave with breath and the arms, once capable of snapping a man's

neck, hung lifelessly at the side.

It was a corpse, a relic. A husk.

The Doctor stepped forward, innate curiosity replacing sickening

horror.

The husk's eyes snapped open.

Brilliant, sharp blue orbs met the Doctor's, dancing with recognition.

Cracked, grey lips patted as the figure made to speak.

'I knew you would return,' the same, silky voice of Oracle intoned, echoing the chamber. But now they were joined by a throaty, metallic rasp. The words of the computer were the words of the wretched figure that lay before the Doctor. 'Welcome back to the Forge, Lazarus.'

The Doctor could only look on in shock. ‘Nimrod.’

Data screamed across the synaptic data implants fused into Nimrod’s brain, data thrown up from his... from Oracle’s vast memory banks.

Past encounters with the being standing before him. Over a dozen

faces, the same man. Some familiar, some merely recognised from

anecdotal reports and video footage. Images froze for a second as he sorted through them. The Doctor who served under UNIT. Nimrod had always regretted that they’d never met. The short, scruffy one that Crichton always boasted about meeting. The young blond encountered by Clarke in Australia. There! A perfect match. The same hat, same heavy eyebrows, same ridiculous umbrella. Why did it have to be him?

Nimrod would have preferred the one with the long, brown hair or

even the original Lazarus, but this one? So smug. So knowing. So sure of himself. Even now, standing in the heart of the Forge utterly

defenceless, he had the air of a man who thought he was in control. But there was an uncertainty that hadn’t been there before.

Nimrod watched as the Doctor broke his gaze and began to wander

around the Forge’s primary core, his eyes moving over every inch of 203

the chamber. ‘I must say, Nimrod, I’m not sure I like what you’ve done with the place. It’s a bit too... dour in here. Open a window, let in some natural light, a bit of fresh air.’

‘Irritating as always, Doctor’ rasped Nimrod.

The Doctor turned, flashing a grin. ‘I still like to play to the home crowd.’

‘Why are you here, Doctor?’

The Doctor leant forward on his umbrella, twinkling eyes intent on the decaying shell of a living being before him. The initial surprise had slipped from his face, replaced with morbid curiosity. Finally, he broke the silence. ‘We’ve crossed swords many times, Nimrod. And I’d be a fool to think my future won’t bring yet more encounters between us, encounters you’ve already experienced.’

The bright blue eyes within the sunken, death mask face stared back.

‘I’ve cursed you in the past, for good reason,’ the Doctor continued.

‘Your atrocities are without number, your skewed moral code always belying the humanity that I knew lay somewhere deep in your heart.

But –’ the Doctor was on the move again, walking in an arc round the cavernous chamber ‘– I never expected you to become this!’ He threw his arms out wide, sweeping the point of his umbrella out wide like a manic university lecturer.

Was that disgust in the Time Lord’s eyes? Perhaps. Nimrod could

live with disgust He’d endured disgust at his own flesh for most of his existence. For a second, he saw himself in his quarters deep beneath that old asylum on Dartmoor, pumping fresh human blood into his

veins, cleansing himself, washing away the impurities attempting to replace them with a vestige of humanity.* Of course, within seconds, the Twilight virus had taken hold again, rewriting the blood cells within seconds of them surging through his ravaged body.

He remembered the day Frith blundered in on the ritual, recalled the look of revulsion on the chief of security’s face. It hadn’t concerned Nimrod then. He knew he’d never be human again, but followed the

daily ritual irrespective. And what of humanity? Frith had been human the day Forge security operatives had pulled him from the escape hatch after the Hades Protocol had been activated, flesh burnt from his bones as he gasped his last on a medical stretcher on the cold Dartmoor wasteland.

Human meant being weak. Human meant being limited. Human

meant waste.

‘I have fulfilled my destiny,’ Nimrod intoned in that gentle metallic

* See Project: Valhalla (novel, 2005)

rasp, not quite living, not quite machine.

‘Destiny?’ the Doctor replied. ‘You were a lot of things, Nimrod.

Driven? Yes. Ambitious? Undoubtedly. Ruthless? Without question.

Mistaken? Often. But, whatever path you walked, whatever actions you took, you believed in yourself and you believed that those actions were justified. Unequivocally.' The Doctor paused. 'At times, I even

admired you.'

The Doctor's words echoed away into nothing. More silence

followed, save for the almost imperceptible hum of the most advanced computer system in the world and the gurgling of nutritional fluid flowing through the snaking tubes that surrounded Nimrod.

'And here I find you, buried, hardwired into the systems you helped create, a puppet to your beloved Forge, opening doors for them,

conning 1eports, boiling the kettle. You've become their slave.'

'That is not the case.'

'So tell me.' That intense gaze, the Doctor's eyes boring into

Nimrod. 'What are you?'

'I. Am. The. Forge.'

In another time, another place, Nimrod would have spat those words at the Doctor with forceful anger. Now they were just intoned with mechanical precision. A fact.

'What did you say?' the Doctor managed to say.

'I am the Forge.'

'That's impossible,' the Doctor breathed. 'Unless...'

Once again, Nimrod remained silent.

'You did this to yourself.'

Grey tissue stripped away, replaced with technology created on an alien world. Machinery abandoned, left behind, harvested and put to work. For King and...

'I never fail to be impressed by your deductive skills, Doctor. I became my own work. The last, great experiment.'

‘But why?’ the Doctor said, the true horror of what lay before him dawning. The Doctor moved round the metallic stack of wiring and

tubes that cradled Nimrod with the look of a prospective customer scrutinising a second-hand car. ‘Did you plunge the scalpel into your own flesh?’

A flash of remembered pain seared through Nimrod’s memory.

‘Did you splice your nervous system into those implants yourself?’

The final connection. Synapses firing as wet, organic analogue

collided with hard-edged digital. The filters holding. A mind

expanding. Knowledge screaming through every ounce of grey matter.

Experiences he’d never imagined, data he could feel deep within the core of his being. Rushing. Intoxicating. Overwhelming.

Fascinated horror turned to anger. ‘This is senseless!’ the Doctor shouted. ‘A senseless waste!’

‘Why, Doctor? I have spent my life, my existence, expanding,

striving to adapt, to improve. Directors came, directors went, and yet Nimrod remained, the beating heart at the centre of the Forge. The Forge as you see it today was my vision.’

‘And what kind of Forge is that? A Forge that had amassed so much power it was able to break away from the shackles of government,

using plundered alien technology for financial gain? Oh, yes, I’ve kept an eye on the Forge, watching as years turned into decades and the Forge transformed within a century to become the most powerful and influential conglomerate in the world. And all the time, I wondered what became of you within this... behemoth.’

‘My vision, Doctor.’

‘And is that the vision that William Abberton saw on the night he plunged that syringe into his arm and changed his life forever?’

A black and white photo on a file. A forgotten name. A man

bleeding on a cold, stone floor. A choice made, a life extinguished, a new mission accepted. Case closed.

‘William Abberton died that night. The night Nimrod was born.

Abberton could never have possessed so much knowledge, so much

power.’

‘Power?’ The Doctor stepped closer to the array that held Nimrod.

‘No, my friend, this is not power.’

‘What would you call it, Doctor?’

‘Punishment.’

‘For what crime?

The crime of a man, in a time of war, who operated on the innocent and turned them into monsters for a government to use as weapons. A crime that drove him to rip apart his very soul and transform himself into what he hated the most – his own twisted creation. A vampire. It was that crime that forced him to hunt down his experiments and wipe them from the face of the Earth!’

The Doctor was in full flow, his anger bursting to the surface in a passionate outpouring as he stalked around the chamber, the tip of his umbrella clicking furiously on the metal floor.

‘That was the being I met over a century ago in the bowels of the Dusk. Not the megalomaniac deputy director of the Forge, not the

maniac who disposed of anyone who didn’t play by your rules, but an innocent man who was trying to put right a very human mistake!’

More faces. More memories. The blunt pain of a crossbow bolt

slicing through bleached flesh, the stench of musky corridors beneath the Thames, a man running into the gloom, multicoloured frock coat

flapping behind him. A ticking bomb.

‘An interesting theory, Doctor, but irrelevant. Project: Twilight was terminated but I continued.’

‘What makes you think Project: Twilight ended? Ah, you thought it was over when you slaughtered Cassie. The final end of the Twilight vampires. Done and dusted, you might say.’

‘Project: Twilight ended.’ For the fast time since the Doctor had come face to face with Nimrod, there was a hint of emotion in the flat, electronic rasp.

‘Oh, yes, you killed Reggie; you dredged the Thames to find

Amelia’s corpse. You marched from country to country, ticking off vampires one by one, but you never completed the set.’ The Doctor stepped forward to the base of the array and looked up with sad eyes at the crucified form before him. ‘You knew, in your heart – the heart of William Abberton – that one Twilight vampire would always walk

free.’

Nimrod’s brilliant blue eyes never left the Doctor as the little man reached a hand slowly inside his jacket. When he pulled his hand free something glinted in the glare of the floodlights. A tiny, metallic syringe. He held it in his hand with gentle reverence.

‘I was too late for Cassie. One of my greatest mistakes. For

somebody who is a Lord of Time, it’s ironic how a simple concept like cause and effect manages to creep up on me so often. After Cassie died I vowed that I’d never leave things to chance ever again. I should have…’

The Doctor stopped himself, smiling sadly. He kept staring at the syringe. ‘There are lots of things I should have done. You see, when you murdered Cassie, shot her down, you moulded me, my life, in

ways I couldn’t have possibly imagined. You weren’t solely to blame, there were other factors at play but you helped dictate which road I should travel. I’d failed to save Cassie. I’d left things to chance and they ran away with themselves. When I think of the look in Evelyn’s eyes…’ The Doctor paused, just for a second, haunted again. Well, I think it’s fair to say that I haven’t left much to chance in recent years.’

‘Is that why you’re here, Doctor?’ Nimrod asked, never taking his eyes from the syringe. ‘Dotting the I’s and crossing the T’s?’

‘Tying up loose ends, you mean? Perhaps. I couldn’t help Cassie,

but I can help you.* I can help you terminate Project Twilight. For ever.'

'Is that...'

* See Doctor Who: Project: Twilight (audio drama, 2001)

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'The Twilight cure? Yes, it is. All that time put into perfecting it and I never used it. I guess I never will. But you might.'

'Impossible.'

'Is it? I didn't come here by chance, Nimrod. The telepathic itch that has been playing at the edge of my consciousness for the past few months had something to do with it, a low-level psychic pulse which the TARDIS tracked to this very building. Did you even know you'd sent it, Nimrod?' Data scrolled before Nimrod's eyes, checking

systems, a thousand transmission logs accessed in a split second. No margin for error.

'I sent no signal,' he rasped with mechanical efficiency.

'I'm here all the same. I can't stay long though. There are still tyrants to topple, civilisations to save.'

'Loose ends to tie up.'

'Exactly. So, I'm going to leave now, Nimrod. I doubt you'll try to stop me.' The Doctor strode towards Nimrod, his umbrella point

punctuating his steps before he reached forward and lay the syringe carefully on the side of the console, inches from Nimrod's withered hand. 'I'll just pop this here. Where you can reach it.'

'I have no need of the cure.'

The Doctor looked up from the syringe, his face inches from

Nimrod. Their eyes locked, heavy with meaning.

'Perhaps you don't. But ask yourself this. Dr William Abberton

created Nimrod. Will Nimrod bring Project: Twilight full circle and

restore William Abberton's humanity?'

'William Abberton died a long time ago.'

'Did he? Are you sure?'

Fluid gurgled. Machinery hummed and clicked.

'Of course,' the Doctor breathed out, straightening up with renewed energy. 'William Abberton is human and a human could never survive the ravages your body has endured over the decades. All those

upgrades, xenotech grafted onto flesh, being hotwired into that

computer. A human would perish in an instant. Some might call it a release.'

The Doctor pulled out his pocket watch and flicked it open. He

pursed his lips and nodded, before replacing it.

'But that's not my choice to make. I imagine security operatives will be converging on this position presently. No doubt the Forge is still keen to add me to its collection of alien artefacts. They won't be the first, and they certainly won't be the last. Perhaps my mysterious guardian angel will provide me with a safe path back to the TARDIS.

What do you think?' The Doctor moved towards the door, but turned back briefly. 'Farewell, Nimrod. Good luck.'

Nimrod watched the Time Lord turn on his heels. Without looking

back, the Doctor strolled calmly out of the chamber, raising his straw hat into the air as he passed the threshold.

As soon as he was gone, Nimrod ordered the heavy doors to close.

He monitored the Doctor's journey back through the building, barely registering the unbidden surge of power from within his own systems that opened and closed heavy security doors in sequence. He watched as the Doctor arrived in the corridor where a large blue box was

waiting. Security cameras zoomed in on the strangely shaped key, as the lock was slipped aside and the wooden door unlocked. The sound of the TARDIS's time engines was recorded in the archive for posterity

and sensors swept the empty air that rushed back to fill the space where the capsule had stood. All around the complex, systems carried on as normal. Data was processed, orders were relayed, files were sorted and beside a small, silver syringe, bleached white fingers, which hadn't moved for decades, twitched slightly.

A choice to make.

'Good luck, Doctor.'

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The Book of My Life

Ian Mond

An adventure of the Sixth Doctor

For the short trip to House Osmo, they bundled the Doctor into a black, armoured personnel carrier. Two officers kept the Doctor company, ordered by the Malamud to shoot if he attempted to escape. Of course, they all knew the order was redundant, issued more out of protocol than anything else. It was clear from their books that the Doctor wouldn't bother to escape. Oh, he would rant and rave and bemoan the death of his friends and possibly throw in some blasphemy for shock value. Fact was, he wanted to see inside House Osmo as much as the Malamud wanted to show him.

The Malamud and his retinue of bodyguards waited patiently in front of House Osmo's wrought-iron gate. It was a beautiful morning, the sky a scintillating deep blue, the three suns twinkling with green light.

A soft breeze ruffled through the tall Eloquin trees that lined the inside of the gate.

Precisely as it was meant to be.

During the Malamud's interviews with the Doctor, his book had

never been explicit as to what he should wear. But today it had stated:

'You will dress in your best black suit and white shirt and the blue, polka dot tie your wife bought three years ago for your bookday. Your hair will be swept back with grease, highlighting your prominent

forehead and emphasising your deep-set eyes and your hawkish nose.'

O1 as the Malamud had translated it: he would look imposing and

intimidating and very much like a leader. What his book hadn't

mentioned was how excited he'd feel about today. As the personnel carrier rolled up to the curb, it took all the Malamud's professionalism not to rush over to meet the Doctor. And as he was led to the front gate, the Malamud was glad to see the Doctor's ridiculous patchwork coat and horrid black striped, yellow trousers had been replaced by grey overalls.

'Welcome to House Osmo,' the Malamud said.

'There was no need to kill them.' Behind the bad puns, the verbosity and the awful taste in clothing, there was something genuinely nasty about the Doctor. If the Malamud's book hadn't been so crystal clear on today's events, he might have felt a smidgen of fear.

'Well, as a matter of fact, there was. I can show you the passage in my book.'

'You're an arrogant, narrow-minded little man. By burning their

books those people were breaking free of the shackles your insane society imposed on them!'

The Doctor looked ready to throttle the Malamud. So with practised harmony, his bodyguards levelled their blasters at the Doctor's chest

'The irony is that we did an analysis of the burnt remains,' the

Malamud said. 'From what we could retrieve it was quite obvious your friends in the Non-Linear movement were destined to die in a hail of blaster fire. It was all there in black ink on scorched paper.'

'But it didn't have to happen that way!'

'Actually, it did. Wait till you see what's in the House and then you'll understand why.'

Behind them the wrought-iron gate creaked open.

House Osmo was unlike any other structure on the planet. It was a three-storey, palatial mansion with massive wings and a portico with marble colonnades leading to the entrance. The house was surrounded

by a series of stunning gardens, each one highlighting a specific flower native to the planet. The Malamud led the Doctor and his entourage of guards down a cobbled pathway that wound its way through the

gardens. Through the well-tended trees and beautifully sculptured shrubs you could just make out sections of House Osmo.

'This is just beautiful,' the Doctor said. 'What a distinct mixture of smells and colours. It reminds me of the hanging gardens on

Bethuslea.' The Malamud smiled. 'The house and these gardens were built by Lee Osmo, our first and last president. I'm glad it was

determined that the house remain standing after the revolution.'

'Yes, well, even inanimate objects have a destiny, don't they? But tell me, Malamud, how many times have you had the opportunity to

walk through these gardens?'

The Malamud's smile vanished. 'I'm a busy man.'

The Doctor snorted. 'No, that's not the reason. You don't come here because your book doesn't allow you to come here. Isn't that right?

Still, I bet there's a small part of you, a part that wakes up every morning wishing you didn't know what the day held in store for you, that would love to spend a few hours here exploring these gardens.

Isn't there?'

The Malamud burst out into laughter. 'That's what I like about you.

How you to like to pick and tease and pull until everything falls apart.'

They stood below the portico, before the double front doors. 'Once you see what the House has to offer you'll realise you're wasting your breath.'

The Malamud knocked demurely on the front door. It was opened by

a small, shrivelled old man, dressed in a black, high-collared tunic.

'Archivist.' The Malamud smiled. 'I've brought a guest.'

The archivist glanced at the Doctor with rheumy eyes. ‘Follow me,’

he croaked. ‘And no guards.’

The old man led the Malamud and the Doctor pasta spacious foyer,

with its hardwood floors, delicate, crystal chandeliers and marble staircase, and down a narrow corridor. At the end of the corridor were two steel doors. While the archivist fiddled with a security keypad beside the doors, the Malamud kept his attention squarely on the

Doctor.

The Doctor will stand and stare –

As the steel doors slid open, exposing what was on the other side, the Malamud suppressed an urge to laugh as the Doctor’s eyes oh so slowly widened with surprise.

– and he will come to terms wills what he is seeing –

What they saw were bookcases. Row after row after row of

bookcases, the shelves reaching high into the heavens. And, on each shelf, perfectly ordered like a row of soldiers, were books. Thousands and thousands and thousands of books, stretching out into the distance and into the darkness beyond.

– and you will say –

‘We had to have room for our collection and House Osmo afforded

us that room.’

– and the Doctor will think he has the answer –

‘Each of you carry your books, so these must be duplicates, back-

ups.’

– but he will be wrong, so the archivist will say –

‘Not us. No duplicates.’

– and the Doctor will turn to you and he will see your smile –

But if they’re not your books, then whose books are they...’

– and you will confirm all his fears –

‘That’s right.’ The Malamud smiled. ‘Everyone has a book. The

people, the buildings, the gardens, even aliens who visit our planet, just passing through, on their way to their next adventure. Everyone has a book.’

– and the Doctor will finally realise the truth.

‘All of this, all these books, every single one of them.’ The Doctor 212

shook his head. ‘It’s just not possible.’

‘Well, how about we take a look.’

And with the archivist leading the way, they surrounded themselves with the Doctor’s destiny.

The Doctor walked from shelf to shelf. From time to time he would open a book at a random page, shake his head and then carefully,

almost 1everentially, put the book back where it belonged.

The Malamud and the archivist stood beside a simple wooden table, piled high with the Doctor’s book. It was important to give the Doctor his space, allow him the opportunity to realise the truth.

‘You know, I once tried to keep a journal. You never know when the information might come in handy. But this…’ The Doctor picked up another slice of his life. ‘My entire life written in horrid second person and the most deathless prose style I’ve ever had the misfortune to read.

Utter drivel.’

The Malamud had to keep reminding himself that the Doctor’s

blasphemy was a coping mechanism, his way of dealing with the truth.

‘It’s all here, Doctor. Your adventures with the Monoids, the Krotons and the Bastablons. All of it.’

‘And I suppose you’ve read it all.’

‘Absolutely not – there are over 750,000 books devoted your life.’

‘That many?’ The Doctor actually appeared impressed with himself.

‘Well, I suppose I do have a busy life.’

‘Busy?’ The Malamud laughed. ‘Most people are lucky to generate

25 volumes. Before you, the record was 34. But some of your volumes, Doctor, don’t even cover a day of your life. By our estimates you must be over twenty thousand years old.’

‘I have an excellent skin-care routine.’ The Doctor put back another book, wiping his hands against his grey coveralls. ‘Now, why don’t you both tell me where these books came from?’

‘The doorstep,’ croaked the archivist. ‘I wake up and it is there.

Your book. On the doorstep.’

‘Yes, but who leaves them there?’

‘We’re not meant to know,’ the Malamud said. ‘I know that I’ll die never knowing the origin of my book or your book. They simply are.

They exist *ex nihilo*.’

‘Nonsense! Even hack work that bad must come from somewhere.’

The Doctor began to pace up and down. ‘And someone on this planet must know. Don’t you understand, Malamud? If I can find the source of the books I can stop it. I can give you and your people the

opportunity, the chance, to make up your own minds and not live a constant self-fulfilling prophecy.’

Even though the Malamud knew the Doctor would resist the truth he still found it all very frustrating.

‘Doctor, as a time traveller you know that the future has already been set.’

‘Don’t assume what I know, or what I believe. The future is far more flexible than you think, which is why I know that all this, all these books, are an abomination.’

‘Well, I can’t argue with someone who’s travelled so far and wide.

And yet, since you've landed I've known your every move. In fact, I've known since I was old enough to understand what the words in my book meant.' The Malamud took a deep, relaxing breath. Each word

from this point on was precious and important and worth savouring.

'Doctor, you have been part of the history of this planet since the days the first books appeared. For so many hundreds of years, we had no idea who you were. But every so often there would be another volume, detailing the adventures of someone called the Doctor and his

companions. So we collected your book, waiting for the day when it would make sense to us.

'And seventy years ago your name appeared in someone else's book

and you've been popping up in our destinies ever since.'

The Doctor sighed. 'That's a lovely story, Malamud, but however

accurate those books might be, I know they're simply reporting on my life, not foreshadowing it.'

The Malamud picked up a volume from the pile on the archivist's

desk and handed it to the Doctor. He didn't need to look at it to know it was the right one.

'That's the last volume, Doctor. We received it three years ago and there hasn't been once since.'

'It's much shorter than the others.'

'That's right, not even half the length of a normal volume. Why

don't you open it?'

The Doctor hesitated.

'Is there something wrong?' the Malamud asked.

'Absolutely not; But his reluctance was obvious.

Because he knew.

He knew and it scared him.

‘Why don’t I tell you what’s in the book. I mean, I’ve been aware of its content for some time.’

‘Whatever’s inside here, I refuse to believe it.’

But the Malamud knew better. The truth was so close.

‘So open it. Read it. Tell me what it says.’

The Doctor opened the front cover. Turned the first page. Turned the second. Seconds later he was finished.

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‘Like I said, I don’t believe it.’ But the Doctor’s voice lacked any confidence.

‘Maybe so. But my book says differently.’ And with a smile, the

Malamud repeated, word for word, precisely what his book said

‘And the Doctor will finally open the book. He will read its contents and he will come to realise that his every activity, leading up to this moment in House Osmo, has been determined.

‘And while he will deny it to you, the Doctor will know for certain one other thing.

‘He will know that in two days he will be dead. For this is his last adventure.’

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About the Authors

IAN BRIGGS wrote two stories for BBC One’s *Doctor Who* during the Sylvester McCoy era – 1987’s *Dragonfire*, which introduced the character of Ace, and 1989’s *The Curse of Fenric* – both of which he novelised for Target Books. He has also written for *Casualty* and *The Bill*.

XANNA EVE CHOWN is a writer and editor who has contributed stories to five *Short Trips* collections, as well as a recent Enid Blyton-esque encounter for Benny in *Bernice Summerfield: Missing*

Adventures. She has written *Prediction* magazine’s Tarot column since 2004 and hates it when people ask her why she didn’t ‘predict it’

when things go wrong...

MICHAEL COEN's short story *Homework* beat more than a thousand other entrants to win the new writers' competition run by Big Finish in 2007. Although a number of his articles and papers have seen print, he is inordinately chuffed that his first published fiction is part of Big Finish's *Doctor Who* range. He is currently working on a novel for younger readers, and has released several TV scripts into the wild, hoping they find a home.

NEIL CORRY is a freelance journalist, and works or has worked on a wide range of titles including *James Bond Spy Cards*, *Doctor Who Adventures*, *Film Review* (as editor), *Doctor Who Battles In Time*, *All About Soap* and many others. He still writes, when they let him, about film and TV. His previous Big Finish contributions are as the co-writer of the Bernice Summerfield audio *The Heart's Desire* (with David Bailey), and short stories in *Bernice Summerfield: A Life of Surprises* and *Short Trips: The Ghosts of Christmas*.

MAT COWARD has written scores of short stories – crime, science fiction, children's, humour, horror and fantasy–which have appeared in dozens of magazines, anthologies and e-zines in the UK, USA, Europe, Australia and Japan. He has been broadcast on BBC radio, and

shortlisted for the Dagger and Edgar awards. His books include two

collections of his science fiction and crime stories and a series of whodunnits, as well as the notoriously unhelpful writers' guide,

Success & How To Avoid It, a children's science fiction adventure, and *Classic Radio Comedy*. He's gardening correspondent of the *Morning Star* newspaper, and a researcher for BBC TV's *QI*. The highpoint of his career so far is the publication of this, his first Doctor Who story; he's been a fan since 1963, aged three-and-a-half.

JOHN DAVIES was born in Chesterfield, raised in Dronfield, but now lives in Manchester. His first story for Big Finish, *Dear John* in *Short Trips: The Centenarian*, was described by *Doctor Who Magazine* as 'captivatingly charming' and by *SFX* magazine as the 'joy of Doctor Who in a nutshell'. His second, *Plight of the Monkrah* in *Short Trips: Snapshots was*, considering the story was basically a one-act joke, thankfully called 'amusing' by *Doctor Who Magazine*. This, his third, carries a government health warning.

ROBERT DICK wrote his first *Short Trips* story, *The Gift* in The *History*

of Christmas, as he thought it was time there was a meeting between the Brigadier and the first Doctor, and he was delighted to be asked to write a second. He also played the servitor robots and various uncredited growlers in the first series of Big Finish's *Gallifrey* audio dramas.

JOHN DORNEY was one of the winners of the Royal Court Young Writers festival 2000 with his play *Cowboys*, and won the inaugural Essex Playwright's Festival with *The Golden Fleece*. He's written for Hampstead and Soho Theatre, had work performed in Australia and

Canada, and was picked by the Royal Court to represent the UK at the International Young Writers festival Interplay. More recently, he's written sitcoms that don't get made, sketches for two series of the Radio 4 comedy show *Recorded for Training Purposes*, and songs – as balladeer for Mark Watson's if.comeddie award winning long shows.

For Big Finish he's acted in two *Doctor Who* plays and four *Gallifreys*, and written the script *Remember Me* for the third series of *Sapphire and Steel*.

IAN FARRINGTON (editor) has compiled four previous *Short Trips* collections – *Past Tense*, *Monsters*, *A Day in the Life* and *The Centenarian* – and was the range editor of the series for its first 22

anthologies. He has written for many *Short Trips* and *Professor Bernice Summerfield* books, co-produced Big Finish's *UNIT* audio series, and was the assistant producer of the company's *Doctor Who* audio ranges from 2002 until 2006. He has also contributed to *Doctor* 217

Who Magazine and is currently the sub-editor of *All About Soap*.

SIMON GUERRIER is the author of the original *Doctor Who* novels *The Time Travellers*, featuring the first Doctor, and *The Pirate Loop*, featuring the tenth Doctor. He's written six audio plays for Big Finish, produced their Bernice Summerfield series for two years, and is the editor of the forthcoming *Short Trips* collection *How The Doctor Changed My Life*.

STEPHEN HATCHER is Head of Modern Languages for a secondary school in Stoke-on-Trent. He is the coordinator of the Whoovers

Doctor Who local group, and a regular contributor to a number of fanzines, including *Shockeye's Kitchen*, *Enlightenment*, *Myth Makers* and *TSV*. Steve is the author of three stories published in previous *Short Trips*: *Ante Bellum* in *Past Tense*, *The Touch of the Nurazh* in *Monsters*,

and *Testament* in *The Centenarian*.

LIZZIE HOPLEY is a RADA-trained actress and writer. Her radio plays include *The Elizabethan Beauty Law* (starring Annette Badland as Elizabeth I) and *The Cenci Family* (which was shortlisted for a Sony Award and a First Play Award) – both for Radio 4 – and *Salome* for Radio 3 (starring Florence Hoath). Her sci-fi screenplay, *The Revenant Code*, was also shortlisted for a Sony Award by the British Film Council in 2004. For the theatre, Lizzie has written *Pramface*, a horror-revenge tragedy about celebrity and chavs, which won the Plat de Jour in Edinburgh in 2005, has toured the UK, and which provided the

inspiration for her last *Short Trips* story, *Golan*. Lizzie's first contribution to the *Short Trips* series was for *The Centenarian*. Her acting work includes voicing the Mantasphid Queen in an animated

series, *The Infinite Quest*, for BBC One's *Totally Doctor Who*, while her Big Finish appearances include roles in *Doctor Who: Night Thoughts*, *Cyberman* and *I, Davros*. In her Big Finish debut, she played Gemma Griffin, the Doctor's companion, in Joseph Lidster's *Terror Firma*. Notable TV and film work includes *Pierrepoint* with Timothy Spall (Granada Films) and *Randall & Hopkirk (Deceased): Whatever Possessed You?* (BBC).

GEORGE IVANOFF is an author and stay-at-home dad who resides in Melbourne, Australia. He spends a lot of time writing books for kids and teens – 25 so far, and more on the way, including a five-book series, *Cory Jansen: Teen Spy*. He also writes for grown-ups – short stories, articles and reviews for magazines and anthologies – and he's even had a go at scripting a short film. He's been a *Doctor Who* fan for about 30 years and is delighted to have had the opportunity to write 218

about his favourite Time Lord for *Defining Patterns*. George occasionally moonlights as an actor, most recently playing Professor Wentworth in the film *Frozen Butterflies*.

IAN MOND, with his degree in philosophy, has been waiting for years to write a Doctor Who story about free will, determinisin and fate. In the meantime, he's honed his writing skills in *Short Trips* collections such as *Past Tense* and *Monsters* (both written with Danny Oz), *A Day in the Life*, *The Centenarian* and the forthcoming *Transmissions*. He's also written the odd story for Bernice Summerfield in the collections *Life During Wartime*, *A Life Worth Living* and *Collected Works*. He lives

in Melbourne, Australia, and thanks Monash University for

opening his eyes to thought experiments, metaphysics, epistemology and Richard Taylor's seminal paper, *Freedom, Determinism and Fate*, whose tale of poor, fated Osmo inspired his story.

DAVE OWEN is a veteran contributor to *Doctor Who Magazine*, having helmed its review section during the 1990s (when Russell T

Davies, no less, wrote to praise his critique of his first *Doctor Who* novel). He has so far been lured back to *DWM* twice, most recently as resident television critic. His other feature credits include *27 Up*, the definitive exploration of how *Doctor Who* might have played on after its cancellation. *Numb* is the second time this hunter has become the hunted, the first being the acclaimed *Come Friendly Bombs...* in *Short Trips: Past Tense*. After two decades in the IT industry, he works as a consultant to the financial sector. He is married to Helen, and lives in Edinburgh.

STEVEN SAVILE is the author of the Von Carstein Vampire trilogy, *Inheritance*, *Dominion* and *Retribution*, set in Games Workshop's popular Warhammer world, and has reimagined the bloodthirsty celtic barbarian Slaine from 2000 AD in a duology of novels for Black

Flame. He has edited a number of anthologies, including the *Short Trips* anthology *Destination Prague*; written a novel, *Shadow of the Jaguar*, based on the British television series *Primeval*; and is the author of an audio novel, *Hidden*, for BBC Television's *Torchwood*.

Steven has written for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as well as his own novels and short stories, including *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos) and *Angel Road* (Elastic Press). In his copious spare time, Steven... em...

writes... He was a runner-up in the British Fantasy Awards, and a winner of a Writers of the Future Award in 2002.

CAVAN SCOTT and **MARK WRIGHT** have collaborated on three audio plays in Big Finish's *Doctor Who* range and a number of short

stories. Their first novel, *Project: Valhalla*, was published in 2005, and they edited the 2007 *Short Trips* collection *The Ghosts of Christmas*.

Cavan is the editor of BBC *Countryfile* magazine and has written for Big Finish's *Tomorrow People* and *2000 AD* ranges. Mark is the production editor of *All About Soap*, and, as well as writing for the

Tomorrow People series, adapted Bryan Talbot's classic comic series *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*.

CHRIS THOMAS is a writer, actor and journalist from Perth, Australia, who has many eclectic acting credits to his name, matched with broad media experience, working for mainstream newspapers,

independent publications and freelance for a variety of titles. He is the author of the novel *Journo's Diary* and the plays *Which One?* and *Reality Matters*. The latter was the only Australian play chosen for the *4Shorts Plus* season in New South Wales in 2007. This is his first *Doctor Who* short story.

BRIAN WILLIS previously appeared in *Short Trips: The Centenarian* with his story *Ancient Whispers*. He has done the requisite number of peculiar jobs (doorman, forklift-truck driver, telesales for a company selling protection against the Millennium bug) to make these biogs seem of vague interest, as well as writing short stories, a novel and stage productions. He lives in Swansea.

SHORT TRIPS:
DEFINING PATTERNS

EDITED BY

IAN FARRINGTON

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